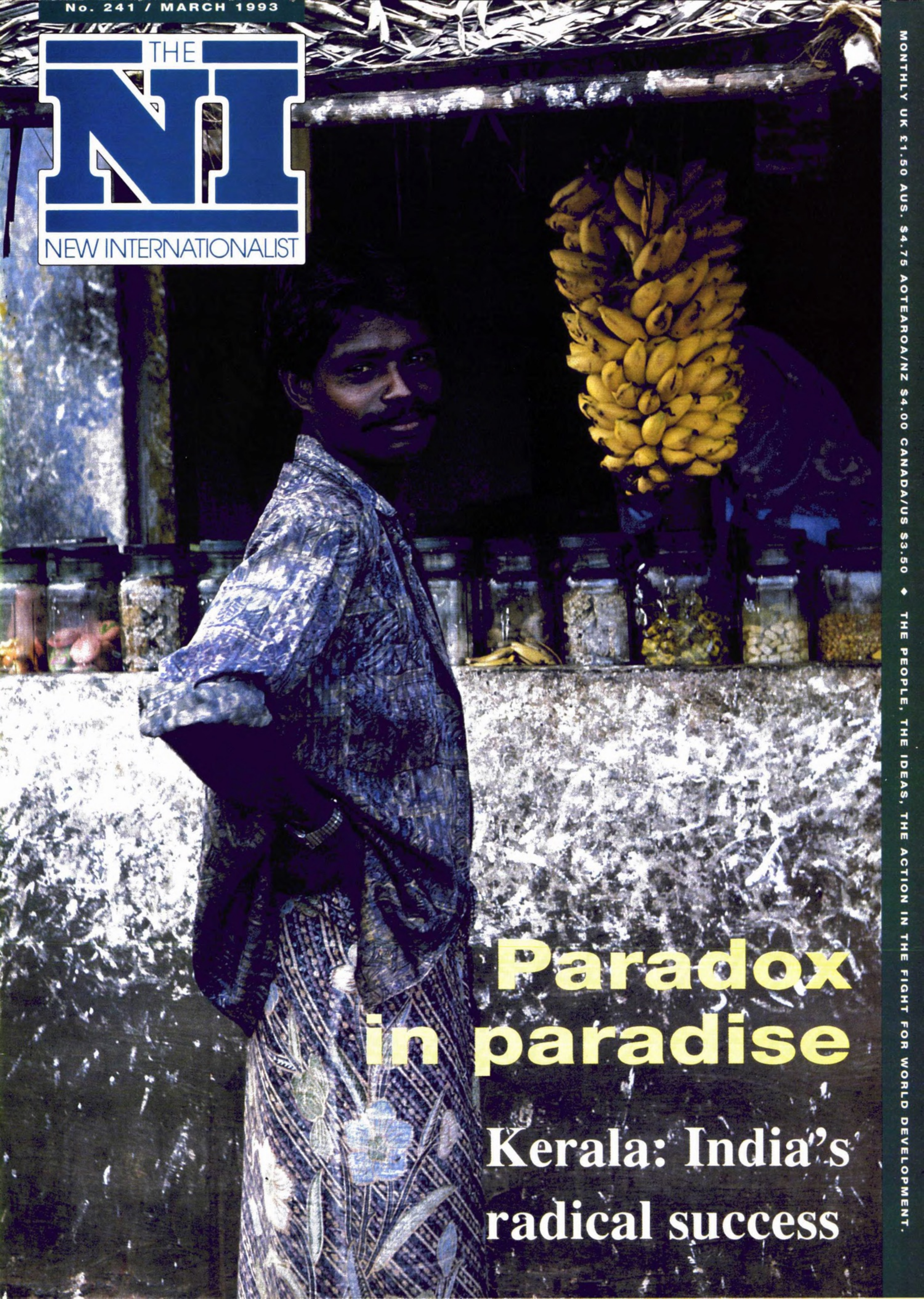




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Troth Wells

Troth Wells, for the NI.

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FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH: BANANA SELLER IN THE FISHING COMMUNITY OF VIZHINJAM, KERALA BY GAELLE ROUX.

THIS MONTH'S THEME

Kerala

FROM THIS MONTH'S EDITOR

NOTICE something different? No? Flick through your **NI** again. Yes, we have moved to full colour. There are many good reasons why we have decided to take this leap. One is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get good black-and-white photographs: most professional photographers now shoot almost entirely in colour. Many of the best black-and-white photos available to us through agencies and photo libraries are actually conversions from colour. Although the technique for doing this has improved tremendously in recent years it still can never really match the original.

Another reason is that we want to keep up with the times. Modern computer technology enables us to do increasingly exciting graphs and charts – and we feel that colour can only enhance the vividness and accessibility of **NI** specialities such as the Facts spread.

But there is an ideological reason too and it has to do with our perception of the so-called 'Third World'. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is with an example. Take two identical photographs – one in black and white and one in colour – of a street scene in a Brazilian favela or shanty town. What you see in both photos is people living in poverty. But what you do not get to see in the black-and-white photo is that the people living in that poverty have painted the walls of their dwellings bright yellow, green and blue. They have managed to bring a bit of joy into a most unpromising environment. That dimension of resourcefulness and creativity is lost entirely in the black-and-white picture. And it is a dimension that anyone who has ever been to a Third World country

and met its poorer inhabitants will know is vital if we are to get a fuller sense of what they and their lives are really like.

Happily **NI**'s move to colour coincides with our twentieth anniversary. The choice of subject for this month – the southern Indian state of Kerala – may seem a little obscure. Kerala is indeed unusual, but in ways that are highly significant to anyone who cares about justice. It's a poor state in a poor country which manages to keep its people alive longer and educate them better than any of the world's low-income countries. Kerala has been hailed a model for development, a success story whose example other states would do well to follow. What's more, it appears to have achieved this through democratic radicalism, a more equal distribution of wealth and as a commitment to social justice. These are, and have always been, core concerns of **NI**. They lie at the heart of our purpose – to bring to you 'the people, the ideas, and the action, in the fight for world development'. And, now, in full colour.



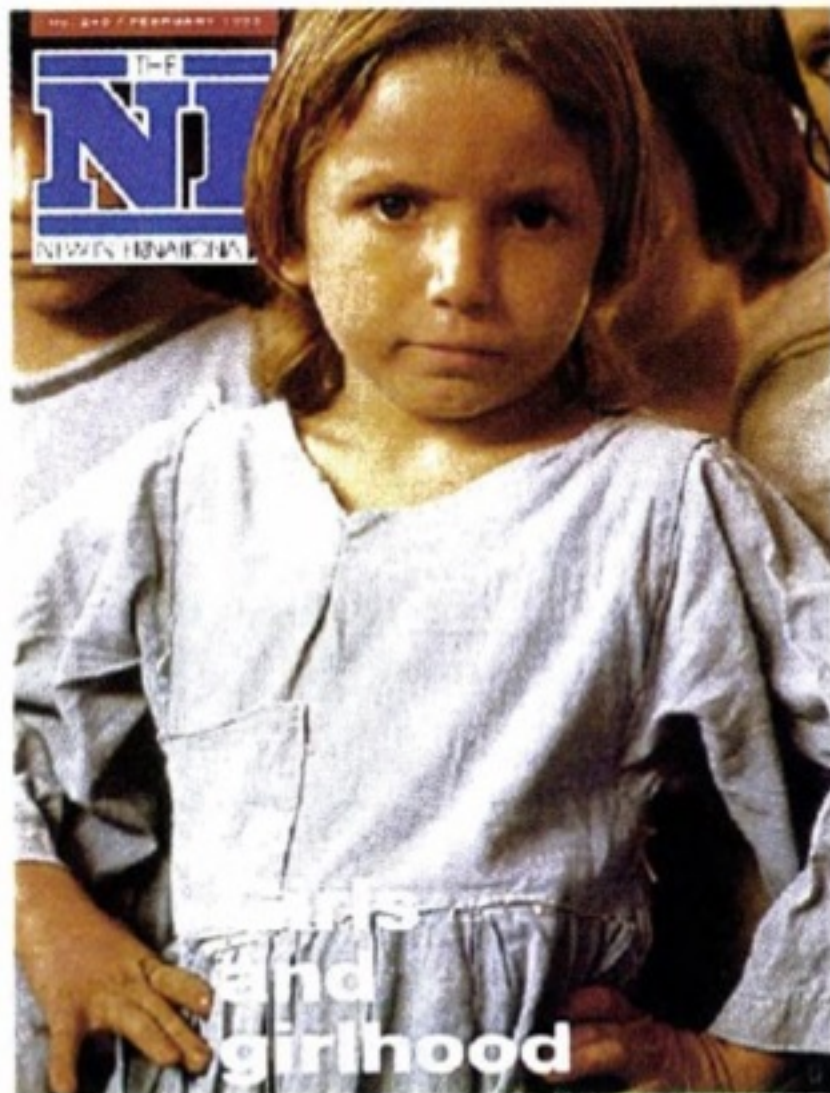
GAELLE ROUX

Vanessa Baird

Vanessa Baird
for the New Internationalist Co-operative

Missing girls

'Why has it taken so long?', I found myself asking when I started reading your issue on *Girls and Girlhood* (NI 240). The pages that followed made shocking reading. I suppose I knew that girls were oppressed and exploited – especially in



poor countries – but I was not aware of the full horror of it.

I have only one criticism. All the articles were written by women experts. But what made the deepest expression on me were the actual words of a two-year-old in 'Being a girl'. She thinks her mother must be a boy – because anyone who is bigger and more powerful than her is a boy. She goes on to say: 'Everybody's a boy, I'm the only girl'. For me that is the most eloquent testament to the awful isolation of the powerless – and it brings home just how early the internalizing of oppression begins.

And yes, it's time girls were heard – not women speaking for them.

G Johnson
Manchester, UK

Not forgotten

In 'The Wages of Work' (*Hard Work* NI 239) Eduardo Galeano claimed that there is no monument to the Chicago martyrs in Chicago. But in fact the five anarchists framed by the State have a large monument in the Waldheim cemetery in Chicago which was erected seven years after their death, in 1893. Alongside them lies the companion of one of the martyrs, Lucy Parsons – a fiery agitator in her own right, of Native American/Afro-American origin – and the great anarchist women activists, Emma Goldman and Voltairine de Cleyre, both



The **New Internationalist** welcomes your letters. But please keep them short. They may be edited for purposes of space or clarity. Include a home telephone number if possible and send your letters to the nearest editorial office. The address is inside the front cover.

won over to anarchism by the death of the Chicago martyrs. The monument is still maintained by elderly Jewish anarchists.

Ron Allen
London, UK

Tribute

I was most interested to read the Emergency Report on Somalia by Tony Vaux (*The Horn of Africa* NI 238). It is a good and useful report – not least because he points to the need not just for emergency supplies but to work for a more hopeful future by distributing seeds. We do find it odd, however, that there is no mention of CARE International which, after the International Committee of the Red Cross, is the largest aid agency working in Somalia, and indeed the agency that has been largely responsible for food distribution in the present emergency. Tony Vaux rightly pays tribute to the courage of Somali relief workers who risk their lives without the security of evacuation plans. I hope you will print this letter as a tribute to the CARE staff – of all nationalities – who have been putting their lives at risk over the past few months.

Julian Hopkins
National Director, CARE Britain

Travelogue

I have respected the content of the NI but the principal issues

were left out of your *Horn of Africa* issue (NI 238). What trade arrangements were made between the West and these countries? How involved were the export credit agencies such as the US Eximbank or Britain's Export Credit Guarantee Department in arms sales? Vast volumes of money were poured into Sudan by the Saudis in the 1980s, a major factor contributing to the arms build-up.

The articles for the most part read more like a travelogue than a stimulus for ideas. You should know as journalists that asking people how they feel doesn't form the basis of an article with any substance. Anecdotes about education and eliminating poverty in the pro-Mengistu press in the early 1980s painted a very different picture of that country.

Michael Halls
London, UK

New Age softsell

I wonder why you gave so much space to Nicola Gregory's cosy softsell of New Age traveller life (*Endpiece* NI 238). Traditional travellers and gypsies have had their nomadic way of life systematically eroded by governments which marginalize and persecute them. They are struggling for survival and would have little time for the twee pic-

ture of rural romanticism which Gregory paints. The NI should be concerned to give a voice to those gypsies and travellers who are suffering increasing racist attacks throughout Europe, and to those for whom nomadism is no idyll but a result of sheer economic or political necessity.

H Witcher
Bridge of Allan, Scotland

Do your own thing

I enjoyed Nicola Gregory's piece on travellers (*Endpiece* NI 238) and was pleased to note that her family burns only dead wood, buries its bodily wastes and leaves cleared sites. I expect they provide their own income. But the philosophy – prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s and implicit in the article – that it's OK to 'do your own thing' as long as you don't hurt anybody is surely a little negative. Many people during their journey through life feel a need to contribute something – time, effort, money or skill – to the imperfect society which nurtured them and which, God knows, needs help.

Sandy Hedderwick
Leamington Spa, UK

Feeding deceit

I cannot understand how Mr McKinley (*Letters* NI 238) sees the picture of the breastfeeding mother and baby on the cover of NI 235 as sexually provocative or anything else sexual. Your not taking Mr McKinley up on this point fills me with despair, since it seems from your response that you agreed that the picture might have sexual overtones.

On the other hand, the picture is deceptive. Look closely at the baby. S/he is very thin indeed. Why? Undoubtedly because her mother is putting the baby to the breast in a most peculiar fashion that makes it impossible to get an adequate amount of milk. This is a major hurdle for promoters of breastfeeding. There is a feeling that it always comes naturally. But it does not, even in Africa where there is a whole culture of breastfeeding, and even less so in Canada or other Western nations where we live in a bottle-feeding culture and the medical establishment connives with the formula companies and governments to undermine breastfeeding.

Positive image

In response to one of your letters in NI 238 'Sex Sells', I think the cover of NI 235 was great. The more positive images we have of this most natural thing the better. I suppose Ed McKinley would complain about a mother breastfeeding in a restaurant, too. Come on, it's not that shocking!

Alison Garfoot and Cole (who was breastfed for the first ten months of his life and I'm sure is much happier and healthier for it.)
Fleckney, UK



NI did a wonderful service when it exposed the bottle-fed babies of the Third World many years ago. Nothing much has changed, though. Maybe it is time to have another edition on breastfeeding, concentrating this time on the hypocritical roles of the formula companies, medical establishments and governments in 'developed' countries.

Dr Jack Newman
Breastfeeding Support Programme
Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto
Canada

Minimum wage

Your article on tobacco in Zimbabwe (*Updates* NI 237) was very interesting. I am living in an area surrounded by commercial farms. Although the tobacco crop is bringing in lots of money from exports the workers on the farms are not really benefiting. The farmers can say to the workers that things are tough, with drought and mass unemployment, and they are lucky to have jobs. Most of them are still only paid the minimum wage and often not even that much.

A Birch
Mutare, Zimbabwe

Bastard divide

Anyone reading your magazine would think there is no civil war in the former Yugoslavia, extreme privation in Bosnia, Albania, Poland, Romania etc. What have you really got against people living – and most probably dying – in Eastern Europe? Is it the fact that most of them are white or Slavic? Is it because they are Eastern, therefore threatening to you Westerners? Or is it that they are being equally exploited by the Western capitalist machine you obviously live off, therefore distracting attention from the impoverished people of the South? The Berlin Wall may have come down but the bastard East-West divide is still there, carved in the blood of the poor victims of poverty and civil war, now in an economic form. Perhaps you watch the TV propaganda just a little too much.

Gavin Mackie
West Mercia, Middle England

The views expressed on the letters page are not necessarily those of the NI.

LETTER from **LAHORE**

A suitable arrangement

It's not always just the family that wants to arrange a marriage. **Maria del Nevo** tells Farah's story.

In early December Farah finally received the news she had been awaiting for almost two years. She was to be married.

She had been in love with a boy some years earlier. They used to meet in the park every other evening, where they would sit on the grass, hidden by tall flowers, hedgerows and trees, and Khashif would confess his undying love for her.

Farah had just turned 24 when she finally decided to speak to Khashif about their future together. But he only mumbled and made quick arrangements for their next meeting before rushing home. The next day he didn't turn up. She went to the park every evening and stood by the gates waiting, but she never saw him again.

Her sister-in-law Mira told her that boys rarely marry the girls they have dated on the grounds that if they can go out with one boy they can go out with others. But it wasn't until Farah heard through a mutual friend that Khashif had married his cousin in the traditional manner that she really began to understand. And it was then that she turned on her parents.

'It was awful,' Mira said. 'One evening she started screaming at her parents. She said that they had better do something soon. She also said that if they didn't have the money for her marriage she'd make them sell the house.'

After that day Farah never gave her parents a moment's peace. Haunted by their daughter's threats they went to the best marriage bureau.

'There was one other problem,' Mira went on. 'Farah didn't want just anyone. She was after the film-star type. Tall, handsome and rich.'

Prospective in-laws could not be entertained at the family house, which only had three rooms and was situated along a lane so narrow that even a rickshaw could not enter. Other arrangements were quickly made.

Rashida, another sister, had married three years previously. She was the second wife of an entrepreneur who set her up in a spacious and well-furnished flat in a good area, where he visited her once a week. It was decided that Farah's mother and sister would receive interested mothers at Rashida's flat, which they would claim belonged to the family.

Sometimes an entire female clan would turn up – aunts and daughters – eyeing the flat, the furniture, the curtains, the carpets, the neighbourhood. And eventually Farah would be called in from the bedroom and asked to walk around the room a couple of times so that the women could inspect her.

They waited for a proposal. None came. A year went by. Farah's mother became visibly exhausted. Ramadan came. Farah went into near seclusion. She fasted every day and said her prayers five times a day. Whenever I saw her, it seemed, she was bent towards Mecca with her head covered in a long scarf, or standing on her prayer mat with her eyes closed and her palms held upwards.

It was the first week of December before Saleem's mother and sister turned up at Rashida's flat. Saleem lives and works in Dubai and they were over in Pakistan to look for a wife for him. The women took an instant liking to Farah.

The wealth that Saleem's mother displayed, together with her charm and promises, impressed Farah's mother and sister. They saw a photograph of the boy, whom they said looked very pleasant, and accepted the proposal without hesitation. Farah was overjoyed.

I went to congratulate the family. But I couldn't help noticing that Mira was holding something back. I prodded her until she finally opened up and spoke in a whisper so that the family in the next room couldn't overhear.

'He's been married before. The wife was in Dubai with him. The family haven't really explained what happened. They just said that she ran off one day, leaving behind two children. She hasn't been seen or heard of since.'

I gaped at her, stunned and horrified. 'But aren't they worried, sending Farah to Dubai without knowing the full story?'

'They don't want to think about it. This is their only choice,' came Mira's reply. 'It was the only proposal they received which Farah would accept.'

Maria del Nevo is a former NI staff member who now lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.



MIRIAM MCCURDY





Paradox in paradise

Vanessa Baird goes to Kerala in search of the radical paradise she has been told exists there....

THE plane takes a sudden dip. Then it follows the line where the thin band of amber sand meets the blue-brown waves of the Indian Ocean, lashed by the tail-end of the monsoon winds. Beyond the fringe of sand is a thick canopy of coconut trees that seems to stretch to infinity.

This is Kerala, the small state right down on the south-western tip of India. It's known as 'land of the coconuts'. But it has also been called 'the red riddle', the 'problem state' and the 'Yenan of India' (in reference to Mao's Long March).

This was the first state in the world to actually elect a communist government. That was in 1957. What followed has been held up by many as a blueprint for Third World development.

Wealth was radically redistributed through land reform. Social programmes gave Keralites health, education and average life expectancy that is far better than that of any other Indians. Strong unions ensured better pay too.

Foreign aid agencies like Oxfam and Save the Children don't have programmes in Kerala – it's not necessary, they say. And yet, paradoxically, Kerala remains one of the poorest states in the world if you go by all the usual means of measuring wealth.

What is the secret of Kerala's success? All the experts have their own pet theory: 'Communism'; 'the strong Christian influ-

ence'; 'the position of women in society'; 'a rich cultural mix'; 'communal harmony between the various religious groups'; 'a high level of political awareness'; 'militant unions and grassroots organizations'; 'natural resources'; and finally 'the resourcefulness of Keralites'.

In 1991 the Communist-led Left coalition lost the Kerala state elections and a centrist coalition came to power. This may not be as significant as it seems – Kerala's canny voters have the habit of alternating their vote so as not to allow any one group to remain in power for too long.

But I wonder what I will find during my five-week journey through the state. Has this socialist success story continued to develop in a world where socialism seems to have become a dirty word? Is the bedrock of radical ideas strong enough to withstand the right-wing winds of change in the world outside, in India or in Kerala itself? And the most important question of all: does Kerala really provide us with a model for development?

As the plane comes down over the magical trees – punctuated only by the odd church, mosque and temple spire – and touches ground at Trivandrum there is just one thing I feel sure about. It's true what they all say about Kerala's natural beauty. ■





Life on the edge

A trip to Vizhinjam to see the fisherfolk – and nearly cause a fight.

TRIVANDRUM, Kerala's capital. 10.15am. A fan whirs hypnotically overhead. I'm waiting for Mary John, administrator of the Fishermen's Federation for Trivandrum District. Good, I think. My first interview in Kerala and it's with a woman in a position of power.

Mary John appears sporting a full moustache and, I can only assume, an equally full complement of male chromosomes. It's my first lesson. Don't make gender assumptions based on names. At least not when dealing with Kerala's Christians.

'Is it going to be true of most of my female-named contacts?' I wonder as Mary John takes me in an auto-rickshaw to his office. It's tucked away in the labyrinth of busy unmarked streets that makes up Trivandrum. I can see why the receptionist thought it pointless to give me directions. My aim is to visit a fishing village and get a sense of a day and a night in the life of the fisherfolk. Why them? Because they are traditionally among the most oppressed people in Kerala – and provide one of the

best examples of what radical and co-operative politics can do.

A few hours later and I'm on the road to Vizhinjam, about 20 kilometres down the coast, catching glimpses of Kerala's 'rurban' nature. The state is so densely populated, and the land so evenly distributed into little plots with coconut trees, tapioca plants and brightly painted houses, that the countryside and the towns seem to merge.

Magline – 27 years old, a Federation field worker and definitely a woman – has agreed to act as guide and interpreter. She comes from a fishing community herself and speaks with a regulated passion. It's late afternoon when we reach Vizhinjam. The streets are so busy it feels like all its 10,000 or so residents – 7,000 Christian and 3,000 Muslim – are out and about. The

houses are very small. The mosque and numerous Christian churches are very large.

Fish is being sold. Toddy – an alcoholic beverage drawn from the coconut trees – is being bought. In between snatches of conversation and gossip in rapid-fire Malayalam, Magline tells the history of the fisherfolk.

It is a story of extreme marginalization in virtually every sense. For centuries they were the poor people, the pariahs, not allowed into schools, churches or temples, pushed out onto the very margins of the land – into the sea, in fact.

The ruling upper-caste Hindus – who were vegetarian – viewed the fisherfolk as the lowest of the low. These people lived by fish. Dealt in fish. Smelt of fish. And, it must be added, they drank like fish too. Tired after



VANESSA BAIRD

KERALA

FISHERFOLK



VANESSA BAIRD

Holding on: traditional fisherfolk recently won a government ban against trawlers.

a long night's fishing, the men would come back with their catch at dawn. Fish does not keep – it has to be sold quickly. Waiting for them on the shore were the merchants and loan sharks.

'They would buy the fish at rock-bottom prices,' says Magline. 'The same merchants would often lend money the fishers needed to replace craft or nets at an interest rate of 10 per cent a day. If the fisher could not pay back he would have to hand over part or all of his catch to the merchant or moneylender. That's how so many fishers got trapped in poverty.'

Nobody took much interest in the lives of the fishing people – until Portuguese Catholic missionaries arrived in the sixteenth century. They – unlike the lofty Syrian Orthodox Christians who had already been in Kerala for about 1,000 years – saw the fisherfolk as souls fit for conversion.

For the first time the fisherfolk got some status. They had a church and with it an organized social life. At a price though. The Church came to own the land on which their huts stood and extracted ten per cent of their catch as well – hence the large churches and the small houses.

Held in the grip of this unholy trinity of merchants, moneylenders and tithe-hungry priests, the fisherfolk had little to celebrate. It was only in the 1960s, with the arrival of radical nuns and priests influenced by Marxism and Liberation Theology, that life really began to change. Undaunted by the Communist Government's failure to get a co-operative movement going, the radicals decided to give it another go.

It was not going to be easy. Like many groups oppressed for centuries, the fisherpeople were deeply conservative, traditional and fearful. But the activists struck upon the idea of creating a totally new co-operative fishing village. It was called Marianad – and it provided a model which has now been adopted by fishing communities all along Kerala's coast. The emphasis was on co-operative marketing of fish rather than shared ownership of craft and gear.

Magline becomes animated: 'Instead of handing over the catch to the merchant, the fishermen gave it to the Co-operative to sell for the highest price possible. And instead of borrowing money from the moneylenders they could borrow from the Co-operative, which could get low-interest loans from banks.'

While we talk the men are out at sea – their flimsy four-person plywood boats and catamarans bobbing about on the great monsoon rollers like so much flotsam. Over 100 fishing boats have already been lost in Kerala this season. Other states ban fishing during the monsoon. It's too dangerous to go out 90 per cent of the time.

The fishers face another problem – depleting fish stocks. 'It's the trawlers that are to blame,' they say. The trawlers come from other ports – sometimes from neighbouring states – and scoop up most of the fish in their fine-mesh nets. There have been pitched battles at sea. 'We lost a boy from the villages in one of these clashes recently,' says Mamanies, a traditional fisher.

The trawlers also drag their nets along the sea bed and destroy fragile breeding grounds. But the traditional fisherfolk – helped by a radical pressure group called Programme for Community Organization – recently managed to get a government ban on trawlers fishing during the three-month monsoon and fish-breeding season. They would like the trawlers banned completely.

So far nearly all the talk has been about the 'fishermen'. But what about the women? Shrinking catches mean fewer

women are involved in their traditional role of vending fish. And there are other pressures on women – the high level of domestic violence, for example.

'Men go to *arak* [toddy] shops after fishing,' explains Magline. 'Then they come home and expect to have their wife receive them with a smiling face. There are conflicts – the couple become estranged. The man beats his wife. This happens in most families.'

The fights are often over money. Most families live below the poverty line – and Catholic fishing families tend to be large. 'Women need money for children, for sending them to school. Sometimes men do not want to give money for this so there is more conflict. Women talk to each other and sometimes a group of women will meet with a man who is beating his wife and try to reason with him.'

Dusk is falling as we make our way through a narrow maze of dense habitation and tropical vegetation to the house of Arojia Mary, President of the Vizhinjam Fisherwomen's Co-operative Society. The coconut trees sway in the breeze that's coming off the sea at last, and the crows' squawks get ruder as the sun goes down.

Arojia is an energetic, open-faced woman of 40. Her name means 'bearer of strength', she declares. As she talks people gather. First her children, then her children's friends, then her neighbours and her neighbours' neighbours. Soon this intimate interview on her small verandah has an audience of about 50 people, listening quietly save for the slapping of mosquitos.

She talks about her work – how she arranges literacy classes, helps arrange

low-interest loans and deals with social problems like domestic violence. But she also talks frankly about how her family are up to their necks in debt since her husband lost his plywood boat at sea.

What does she want most in life? 'A regular income and government jobs for my children,' she replies.

Night falls as Arojia talks and someone ignites an oil lamp. The light and shade playing over the listeners' faces creates an atmosphere of magical concentration. Then a gentle rain begins to fall and we pile into her two-roomed house – with its coconut-leaf roof and rough mud bricks. Inside are pictures of Sacred Hearts and Virgin Marys.

As always, it's the conversation that takes place once the tape recorder is switched off that's the most illuminating. At this point Arojia reveals her deepest worry: how to raise a dowry and find a husband for her 19-year-old daughter Panirma. The young woman – who has learning difficulties – sits in the doorway. All eyes are on her. She looks excruciatingly embarrassed. This must be hell for her.

It's time for the inevitable question to me: are you married? No, I reply. How old are you? 37. There is a sharp intake of breath all round. You're 37 and you're not married! Why not?

This is tricky! I mumble something about not wanting to marry. The incredulity mounts. I talk about independence and freedom of movement.

This strikes a chord. One woman asks whether women in my country are allowed to go about on their own. I say, yes, then ask them about their experience.

'Before we started the fisherwomen's society we could not go to other towns alone,' says Arojia. 'If we wanted to go anywhere we had to get our husband's consent. Now we go all over the place. We are even planning a trip to Sri Lanka. Now I simply *inform* my husband and children that I am going somewhere on Co-operative business – I don't ask their *permission*.'

This is not an official part of the Co-op's agenda – but it has probably had a greater impact on these women's lives than anything else.

We spend a night, filled with the noisy revels of returning fishermen, in the house of a man called Nelson. Dawn finds two men hawking toddy from house to house and two others sharing a newspaper while children stand on rooftops brushing their teeth.

It's time to go down to the beach. We pass a large colourful church; across the bay a huge pink mosque shimmers in the early morning sun. The fishermen are coming out of the sea, chanting as they drag boats and nets. It's unbelievably picturesque.

There are an awful lot of people on the beach – and very few fish. The women who have come to buy fish are disappoint-



GAELLE ROUX

Battle of gills: a fish vendor holds out for the best price.

ed. The atmosphere is tense – but people seem to quite welcome the distraction of having their photos taken.

Then something happens which sharply brings home to me how disruptive a foreigner taking photographs can be. I'm taking a close-up of a man mending nets. His friend comes up to me and insists on payment. It's not happened up to now but seems fair enough. I ask Nelson how much I should give. 'Nothing!' he says, categorically. But surely, I remonstrate... 'Don't give him anything!' he insists. The man starts abusing Nelson. Mamanies comes up and faces the man who wants payment. They stand centimetres apart, eyeball to eyeball, both seething. Fisticuffs seem imminent. Oh my God, what have I started here?

Magline suggests we move away and explains that the man I photographed is a Muslim and his friend is demanding payment because he thinks the Christians are onto some kind of money-making racket involving foreigners.

'Don't worry,' she says. But I'm not convinced until we are joined by Nelson and Mamanies. I quiz the latter about relations between the different religious communities. It's okay, he says: if there are problems the communal leaders can usually sort it out.

I leave Vizhinjam thinking about how much has been achieved here but also how precarious it still is. How easily this paradise slides into a purgatory of penury. How easily fishers may go out at night and come back craftless – or not at all. And how delicately balanced is the communal harmony that can be upset with the click of a camera – here on the edge of the land, on the margins of a sea with ever-fewer fish and menacing monsoon rollers.

Arojia Mary, 'bearer of strength' and President of the Women's Co-op.



VANESSA BAIRD

KERALA old and new

Few parts of the world have undergone such a speedy and dramatic social transformation as Kerala. Here we contrast the old Kerala with the new.

CASTE

THE OLD

Kerala had the most cruel and rigid caste system in India. From 800 AD onwards the elite Hindu caste – the Namboodiris – held control. People of low castes were banned from public markets and had to go naked above the waist – regardless of gender. The Namboodiris considered themselves polluted if they as much as saw someone of low caste a hundred metres away and could punish them by death. Namboodiri women were expected to remain virgins, while women of the next caste down – the Nairs – were expected to satisfy the sexual needs of Namboodiri men. Kerala's Christians also operated a kind of caste system, Syrian Orthodox people being on a level with the Nairs and Catholic fisherfolk considered low caste. At the very bottom of the pile were the *adivasi* or indigenous people who have been in Kerala for 4,000 years.

THE NEW

In 1893 a man called Ayyankali committed an outrageous act: although he was an 'Untouchable' he dared to travel in a bullock cart along a public road. There followed other challenges to the caste system, such as low-caste groups uniting to form Caste Improvement Associations. In 1936, after a long campaign, low-caste people were finally allowed into temples in Travancore. In the 1930s and 1940s Kerala's growing trade union and communist movement became involved in the caste struggle. Activists of both high and low caste shattered taboos by eating together and going into each other's houses. Today Kerala is probably the least caste conscious of Indian states – although cross-caste marriages are still unusual. Violence towards low-caste people – commonplace in other parts of India – is rare.



LAND

THE OLD

Land has always been the main source of wealth in Kerala. For several centuries most of the land was owned by the Namboodiris. They did not manage their own estates but leased them to the next caste down – the Nairs. These would sub-lease part or all of the land to a third class of inferior tenants who were the actual cultivators. These cultivators in turn employed lower-caste people to do most of the hard labour in the fields but were compelled to pay exorbitant rents – often 50 to 75 per cent of their gross harvest. Syrian Christian families also tended to have large landholdings and as late as 1971 Kerala's structure of land ownership was the third most unequal in India.



POLITICS

THE OLD

Up until 1956 Kerala was mainly ruled by monarchs controlling different principalities. There was Travancore in the south, Cochin in the middle and Malabar in the north. With the arrival of Portuguese, Dutch, French and British colonizers Kerala became a tangle of intrigues and shifting alliances between the European powers and the local kingdoms. By making treaties with the local princes of Travancore and Cochin the British had managed to get control by 1792. For the next century and a half the British governed Kerala in three separate units, retaining the local monarchs in Travancore and Cochin but imposing direct rule on Malabar in the north. Malabar was to suffer – politically, economically and culturally.

THE NEW

In the mid-1930s a dedicated group of young Gandhians and socialists began organizing poor tenant farmers in north Malabar. These became the backbone of the local Communist Party. Trade unions were formed, rice workers conducted a successful strike in 1942 and four years later coir (coconut fibre) workers confronted the police and army. Meanwhile most Keralites were joining the Indian struggle for independence from the British (achieved in 1947). When state elections were held in 1957 Keralites surprised the world by electing a Communist Government. Communist activists became targets for assassination by killers hired by outraged landowners. But the clock could not be turned back. In the past 30 years Kerala's voters have elected three solidly Leftist governments that have held power for eight years. Despite many twists and turns of party coalitions Kerala has retained its radical political culture.



THE NEW

In 1921 Muslim peasants and farmers rose up against Hindu landowners: 10,000 protesters were killed. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s radical organizations grew and tenants started refusing to pay their rents. It was on the issue of land reform that the first Communist government was elected in 1957. But the land-reform bill of 1959 met with fierce opposition from landowners and the Government of India responded by taking control of Kerala. During the next decade all land-reform attempts were blocked. But in 1969 a Communist-led coalition finally set in motion a 'land to the tiller' redistribution which is regarded as the most thorough in South Asia. Tenants became virtual owners of the land they farmed, no family was allowed to own more than eight hectares, and about one-and-a-half million landless families also benefitted.



RELIGION



THE OLD

Mazuris, one of the ancient world's most important ports, lay just north of present-day Cochin. Greeks, Romans, Persians, Phoenicians, Arabs, Egyptians and Chinese all came here in their quest for spices. With trade came different religions. Legend has it that Christianity was brought to Kerala by the Apostle Thomas (the Doubter) in 52 AD. About 20 years later Jews from Jerusalem arrived seeking shelter from persecution. They established a community in Cochin – where they have remained safe from

anti-Semitism for almost 2,000 years. Syrian Orthodox Christianity arrived in the fourth century and Arab spice traders brought Islam in the seventh. All these different religions flourished alongside the Indian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism in an atmosphere of tolerance and communal harmony that set old Kerala apart from the rest of India – and probably the rest of the world.

EDUCATION

THE OLD

Education was traditionally the domain of the higher castes – the Namboodiris, Nairs and Syrian Orthodox Christians. But with the Europeans came missionaries who set up church schools to instruct and convert members of the lowest castes – especially in Travancore. The progressive Hindu rulers of Travancore retaliated by setting up their own schools. In 1817 the Princess of Travancore called for a state education system, saying 'there should be no backwardness in the spread of enlightenment' because 'by diffusion of education the people would become better subjects...' By the turn of the century Kerala already had a literacy rate double that of the rest of India, had begun a small programme of grants for low-caste children, and was in its fourth decade of female education.



THE NEW

Radicals saw literacy and education as a key to social change. The caste-improvement associations led the way, but soon trade unionists and Marxists were using literacy to awaken consciousness. Reading and writing circles were set up in villages. Workers were encouraged to write in union-sponsored publications. The right to literacy became a popular mass movement. In the 1970s the Kerala People's Science Movement (the KSSP) set up study classes, medical camps and literacy classes in villages. By the early 1980s there were nearly 5,000 village libraries. Today the state has over 400



newspapers and journals, a writers' co-operative that publishes 450 books a year in the local Malayalam language and a literacy rate that at 87 per cent for females and 94 per cent for males is higher than that of any Low-Income Country.

THE NEW

Kerala's new Marxist rulers were unusual among Communists in that they did not condemn religion. They clashed with Hindus and Christians – but over caste and land reform. Some religious leaders found that their own beliefs and the ideals of communism had much in common anyway. This was true of the radical nuns and priests who led popular movements for justice among the poor – especially the fisherfolk. But in recent years the fundamentalism (both Hindu and



Islamic) and communal violence of other parts of India have begun to appear in Kerala too. There have been few outbreaks so far but communal tension may be the greatest threat to Kerala's social harmony and its socialist achievements.



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Ferry to revolution



On the backwaters from Quilon to Alleppey and into Kerala's communist heartland – where it all began.

THREE loud, bad-tempered crows are strutting up and down on the roof of the wooden ferry moored at Quilon jetty. It's the backwater bus and it's gradually filling with locals wanting to get from A to B – and tourists hoping to experience Kerala's stunning network of canals and lagoons.

A woman in a bright yellow sari climbs aboard, followed by her crisp-shirted husband and two well-behaved children. The typical Kerala contraception-conscious, nuclear family – also known as the 'the scooter family' because they can all fit onto one. They sit a discreet distance from a pair of foreign travellers wearing pale dreadlocks, nose rings and clothes in the requisite faded shades.

The diesel engine belches a few times,

then we start to cross Ashtamudi Lake, which is edged with huge fishing nets suspended by a series of weights and pulleys from strange wooden apparati. The nets are Chinese in origin – a reminder that Kerala was an important stop on the famous Europe-to-China trade route.

For the next eight hours we will glide through water that is alternately fresh and salty – as water from rivers joins with sea tides entering the lagoons to produce one of the most delicately balanced aquatic eco-systems in the world.

The backwaters may look tranquil but they function as vital arteries. Along their edges people live, fetch water, wash clothes, themselves and their animals. On the water they transport food, coconuts, building materials and, of course, fish.

The fishers use traditional 'snake boats' which are often co-operatively-owned and bear names like the *Karl Marx*. A young nun, carrying a huge black umbrella, waves at them from her shallow dugout. It's a typical Keralite scene – where tradition, Marxism and Christianity are all rolled into one.

Further on we are proceeding along a dreamy green canal overhanging with trees when suddenly the amber sand becomes black and the trees thin out. Ashen men covered in dust glide up in boats laden with dark grey, oddly glittering earth. It's eerie – and becomes more so as the landscape becomes a colourless wasteland which feels bleakly apocalyptic, like one of Nostradamus' visions of a post-nuclear world of pestilent dust.

A sign – Kerala Rare Earths – reveals all. This is monozite, one of the planet's few deposits of the stuff. Monozite contains Rare Earths chloride, used in the

KERALA

LAND REFORM

petroleum industry and for making mirrors and chinaware. It also contains thorium, which is radioactive, and makes this area four times more radioactive than other parts of India. People living and working here are four times more likely to give birth to children with disabilities. There is a high incidence of Down's Syndrome, deafness, cleft lip, blindness and infertility here – and no sign of any precautions being taken whatsoever.

Men carry the material in big sacks on their backs, then push it glistening in barges down the waterways. Families live in shacks just metres away. Women and children gather water, just as they do everywhere else on the backwaters – but here the scene is far from picturesque. An unctuous black rim marks where water ends and sand begins.

I am reminded of what Quilon-based environmental activist V Padmanabhan had told me the previous day: 'The establishment does not want to learn what is happening to these people because it will involve multi-million dollars in compensation'.

Almost as quickly as we entered this nightmarish scene we are out of it and back in paradise. In another shallow lagoon a man in a dugout throws a net which opens out like a flower. Glistening fishers wearing bright yellow or orange turbans, and without an ounce of fat on them, lift boats and untangle wheat-blond nets.

By mid-afternoon the thick forest of coconut trees gives way to great open paddy fields, with their sheets of water mirroring the sky. We are entering the Kuttanad, the rice-bowl of Kerala, made up of reclaimed land in this otherwise waterlogged area. On the banks of the canal and between the fields people walk – their silhouetted forms looking proud and dignified. When people see or hear the boat

coming they smile and wave – adults as well as children.

It's hard to imagine that earlier this century the ancestors of these people would have dived into the fields if a person of higher caste came along. Today the caste system has been virtually dismantled and 90 per cent of Keralites own the land on which their homes stand. The little houses with their plots along the waterside stand as evidence.

What happened? The power of the high-caste Namboodiri landowners was overthrown by a combination of labourers, tenant farmers and educated radicals. Their common demand: land reform.

The first major challenges to the old order happened right here, in the backwaters near Alleppey. During a serious food shortage in 1941-42 the landowners announced that they would pay their workers not in rice as usual but in cash – and at a pre-war wage rate.

The agri-labourers went on strike – to remarkable effect. The landowners backed down, agreed to a 50-per-cent pay increase and recognized the newly formed union of agricultural labourers and the town-based workers of Alleppey.

Why did the landowners – so arrogant in the past – cave in so easily? The peculiarities of rice-growing in Kerala provide one reason. The below-sea-level paddy fields have to be drained before sowing. This is expensive and the costs have to be recouped with the harvest. The strike took place precisely at harvest time.

Another factor is that the landowners failed to take account of the Communist Party, growing in popularity and with scores of educated frontline workers eager to lead an agrarian class with such revolutionary potential.

In the years that followed there were



GAELLE ROUX

'Snake boats' are collectively owned by those who work on them (above). The elaborate structures of Chinese fishing nets edge Ashtamudi lake (below).

many confrontations – some of them bloody. Awareness was raised but by the time the Communists were elected to power in 1957 most Keralites were still impoverished and landless. Attempts to push through land reform faced tremendous resistance from landowners, judges, the churches, and the Indian Government. It was 1969 before the Land Reform Amendment Act was finally passed.

It was to be the most thorough and radical land reform ever put into practice in South Asia. Tenants became virtual owners, hut-dwellers received the land on which their huts stood (up to 20 square metres), and the maximum any family could own was eight hectares.

Alleppey comes into sight – a bustling provincial town. Its canals give it the name 'the Venice of Kerala'. This is a bit of an exaggeration – but as one well-travelled Keralite pointed out, it's very much greener than Venice. The skies open with yet more monsoon offerings as we disembark.

The town is bedecked with multi-coloured bunting. In a clearing two loudspeakers play two quite different tunes. It's Kerala's big festival of the year – Onam – and people are busy spending their three-month pay bonus. 'Keralites are very clothes-conscious,' a chatty bookseller explains.

I try to work out if there are any noticeable caste differences between the shoppers – men in neat dhotis, women in saris, children



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KERALA

LAND REFORM

RAGHUBIR SINGH / JOHN HILLELSON AGENCY



GAELLE ROUX



A plot for (almost) all: 90 per cent of Keralite families own a piece of land, thanks to radical reform.

its growing profitable. Third, the cost of the inputs – fertilizers and pesticides – is too high. And to cap it all the centre-right coalition government, which has been in power since 1991, is threatening to withdraw the input subsidies for smaller farmers.

So should the state government increase such subsidies? Certainly not, say environmentalists. The Kuttanad and its waterways are already heavily polluted. Chemicals are seriously over-used – about 900 tonnes of pesticides and 40,000 tonnes of fertilizers are sprayed onto the Kuttanad's 60,000 hectares of paddy fields annually. DDT is still used and so is HC – a carcinogen twice as toxic as DDT. Pesticide water pollution has been blamed for the outbreak in 1992 of a hitherto unknown fish disease called Epizootic Ulcerated Syndrome.

In Alleppey that morning I talk with a man who sells pesticides and fertilizers. What has he to say for himself? 'Too much pesticide and fertilizer is used,' he admits. 'The problem is farmers don't follow the safety guidelines.'

'Do they know the guidelines?'

'Oh yes, we tell them to use so much, and to always wear masks and they tell us to go to hell. *They* are the farmers, they say. They know what they are doing.'

'Granddad' Kurian Varkey is a veteran farmer, viewed as an expert in his community of Kanniakarri. He does not think the answer lies in fertilizers or pesticides, whether used or abused. Kerala's agriculture today is stagnant – and the problem is fundamental, he says.

'We are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea,' he says, speaking from the sick bed where he has been confined with a fever for the past two weeks. 'There's no future in rice. But we are not allowed to grow anything else.'

For a long time Kerala has tried to be self-sufficient in rice. It can never happen – even with 26 per cent of the state given over to rice production this only meets a quarter of demand from a population of 29 million people.

The rice-growers say their main problem is that there are too many of them trying to eke out a living on too little land. And – wait for it – that agricultural wages are 'too high'. Kurian Varkey, who usually hires workers during harvest time, says he cannot now afford to pay their wages.

Hmm... not really what I had expected to hear and a bit of a blow for the redistribution theory of development of which Kerala is supposed to be a model. This theory says there is enough for everyone as long as it is shared out evenly.

It's also a blow to the radical ideal of aiming towards food self-sufficiency as opposed to cash-cropping. But then many of Kerala's radicals are themselves abandoning the idea. Marxist economist Thomas Isaac admits: 'Kerala has not been self-sufficient in food since the mid-nineteenth century'. He and others argue that the way forward is to develop agricultural industries to make cash-cropping more profitable. For example, prawns could be exported frozen and packaged so that they could go straight to the foreign supermarket shelf, instead of leaving that value-adding function to the importer. Others talk of allowing farmers in the region to grow crops other than rice.

Change has to come, all are agreed. But few look to the current United Democratic Front Government – a extremely disunited centrist coalition – for ideas. A Leftist programme which might have helped – Village Level Resource Mapping – has been shelved. The idea was to launch a mass popular movement to study resources and make the information easily accessible to villagers, using the highly successful mass literacy campaign of the 1970s as a model.

The challenges of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s hinged on land ownership. The challenge of the 1990s will be to use land in a way that ensures the survival of those living on it. That does not mean poisoning the Kuttanad with pesticides or exposing its people to radioactive thorium.

If Kerala can find ways of balancing its high population with its limited environmental resources then it will become another kind of model the world could turn to. Red alone won't do any more – Kerala needs green politics too. And Keralites know it.

in Western-style clothes. 'Caste isn't really an issue, any more,' says the bookseller. 'There are only a few very old and very traditional people for whom it matters.'

The next day I hire a small backwater boat and set out in search of the fruits of land reform – 23 years on. What have the rice growers on their smallholdings got to say today? Are they happy?

Er... no. Are farmers ever happy? Probably not, but Chakro Mathew, a farmer from the community of Kanniakarri, is particularly unhappy. He's lost nearly half his rice harvest this year. The reasons are manifold.

First, there was too much rain (a complaint to make African farmers weep). Second, the price of rice is too low to make

Respect and respectability

'Our women are the most respected and most liberated in India.' And that is probably the most repeated phrase in Kerala. But not everyone agrees...



GAELE ROUX

'BULLSHIT,' says Nata Duvvury, quietly. She is responding to the theory which holds that Kerala's women are more sexually liberated than others in India and that this is thanks to the customs of the Nair caste.

This traditionally dominant caste was matrilineal – which means property was

inherited through the female as opposed to the male line. And it was quite common – and respectable – for Nair women to have a succession of lovers, providing they came from an equal or the highest, Namboodiri, caste.

Many researchers have interpreted this as sexual autonomy. But, no, insists Nata –

feminist and co-director of the Institute of Imaging Technology in Trivandrum. 'Their brothers decided who they should sleep with. They had no real choice in the matter. It was prostitution – except they were not paid for it.'

Even matrilineage was not as good for women as it's cracked up to be. Women might nominally own the land but the major decisions were still made by men. So it became easy for men to turn family land assets into cash which they then controlled.

But the fact remains that on paper the women of Kerala are much better off than their sisters in the rest of India. Female literacy is at 87 per cent – compared with the 29 per cent in India as a whole. Kerala women have on average two children as opposed to four. They are far more likely to go into higher education. And they hold 30 per cent of government jobs. The women's wing of the communist movement is to be thanked for much of this.

Women were also at the forefront of the mass literacy campaign of the 1970s. 'It was virtually run by girls and young women who wanted to do something apart from getting a BA and getting married,' says Nata.

This sounds fine. But it does not really fit with what I see and hear in Kerala today. Why, for example, are restaurants and coffee houses segregated? Why are there so few women out on the streets of Trivandrum after dusk? – far fewer than in Bangalore, the capital of the neighbouring, comparatively backward, state of Karnataka. Why are there no women whatsoever on a large communist student march

held in downtown Trivandrum at seven in the evening? And why, oh why, when I ask a 25-year-old woman with two degrees what she thinks about the dowry system does she giggle nervously, turn to her husband and ask him what *he* thinks *she* should answer?

Is this equality? Is this liberation? What is going on?

"Female equality" in Kerala means women should be able to get jobs and contribute to the household income,' Nata explains. 'That's as far as it goes. It does

not involve questioning roles or the whole nature of the male-female relationship. Key feminist issues like housework, domestic violence, women's bodies and the meanings of masculinity and femininity, are not being discussed in Kerala today except among a very small minority of women.

'People here are also very proud that we do not have dowry deaths; "it's not like in the barbaric North" they say. But we do have dowry deaths – the difference is that they usually take the form of suicide. There is a very high incidence of young girls

killing themselves because the dowry system is so oppressive and they do not want to be a burden on their parents.' The newspapers recently carried a story about three sisters hanging themselves for this reason.

Dowries in Kerala are phenomenal and, with the influence of remittances from Keralites working in the Gulf states, growing. What is so surprising to an outsider is that women in Kerala do not protest against it in any organized way. 'Even the most educated women go along with it,' says Nata. 'You have young women working just to raise money for their dowries... You have communist women going along with the system because they are afraid of upsetting their parents.'

Finally Nata says the word that has been lurking in the back of my mind. 'Women in Kerala are so *proper*.'

Proper is not the word that springs to mind in relation to Kamala Das, a poet and short-story writer who has caused outrage in Kerala. Her autobiography *My Story* prompted local critics to call her 'immoral' and 'a nymphomaniac'.

I read it before going to interview her and find it humorous and refreshing. I am greeted by a woman who looks you straight in the eye, talks more or less non-stop and has an enormous power to entertain. She has just received a phone call from a stranger who asks if he can love her. She told him he couldn't and put the phone down. 'I'm pushing 60 and it happens all the time,' she says, without a hint of coquetry.

Why does it happen? 'I don't know. Because I am a woman and I have written about sex?'

The irony is that much of her writing about sex is about how disappointing she found it. She describes making love with her husband as 'a marital chore' she endured every night from the age of 15.

Her extra-marital affairs came a bit closer to fulfilling her quest for sexual love. But from her autobiography you sense that the reality of sex never matched the erotic sensuality she was able to pursue in her poetry and her daily experience of living.

Finally she took the plunge, became celibate and concentrated on her writing. 'After that my husband and I got on like a house on fire. We became the best of friends. I encouraged him to take another lover: someone unlike me, someone who was *good* in bed.'

Was it the sex that threw Kerala – or the candour? Or the combination of both coming from a woman? When she came back to the state – having become famous in Calcutta – she was greeted by death threats and a dead dog laid at her door. 'They compared me unfavourably with my mother, a famous poet who had written 43 books of poems about motherhood and devotion to her husband.'

A tale of two Naxalites

A cup of tea with the revolutionaries who were a thorn in the side of both landowners and the Communist Party.

Mandakini and Ajitha are mother and daughter. They also share a political past – as members of the notorious Maoist Naxalite movement. But Ajitha is the better known: she was the 19-year-old who took part in a guerilla attack on a police station in the Wynad region, during which a police officer was killed.

That was back in 1969. Now Ajitha and her mother live a quiet family life in a suburb of Calicut. To get to their house you pass lazy grazing cows, little streams, coconut trees and brightly painted houses.

Ajitha's politics have changed. She is now deeply involved in the feminist movement and has started a radical group called Bodhana – which means 'awareness'. She greets me warmly, serves tea and starts talking about her life:

'I grew up with revolutionary ideas. My father was leader of the Naxalites here in Kerala. When I was 19 I

dropped out of college to devote myself to political activism.

'The aim of attacking the police station was to start the armed struggle in the Wynad area. We were impatient for a revolution. I was not in a leading position but because I was the only woman in that group the newspapers concentrated on me. We were all caught a few days later and our whole dream was shattered.

'The next seven-and-a-half years I spent in jail. I cannot say I was treated well – there was a lot of mental torture. I was not allowed to receive letters from my mother and father, who were also in jail. But I used to read a lot. That kept me going.

'My political beliefs did not change then but I found I could not agree with what many

Naxalites were doing. Individual killings and personal vendettas were being pursued. Naxalites ended up not trusting each other.

'The main political change for me came in the 1980s when I came into contact with feminist ideas – and that is what I have been involved with since.

'I think the situation of women in Kerala is really very bad. Men think they have the right to molest and rape. The family atmosphere is very oppressive. Women in Kerala are generally very meek and do not protest – I believe they are actually more repressed than elsewhere in India.

'At a more global level I see feminism and the environmental movement as the only forces that could challenge the New World Order.'

Mandakini is sitting on the verandah. What does she think of the changes she has seen in her lifetime?

'When I first arrived here in the 1950s it was very exciting. There was so much activism. Today I find Kerala very claustrophobic, especially when I see all the temples. You can't blame ordinary people for turning to religion, for looking there for a glimmer of

hope. There's not much for them – there is so much unemployment and the cost of living is so high.

'I have withdrawn from political activism myself – partly for health, partly for family reasons. But I like to keep in touch with what is going on in the world. When I see them pulling down the statues of Marx and Lenin I feel strange. But we need to move on, for socialism to take other forms. It's a period of churning up. New visions, new ideologies must come up.

'For Ajitha the way forward is through feminism. Maybe this is the way. In our Naxalite days there was never the perception of women as a mass that could be mobilized. In fact she and I were the only women in the movement here...'



Mandakini with granddaughter Gargi (above). Ajitha, guerilla turned feminist (left).





RAGHUBIR SINGH / JOHN HILLELSON AGENCY

Wedding preparations: dowries are phenomenally high in Kerala and as a result suicide among young women is on the increase (above). 'Outrageous' poet Kamala Das (below).

Kamala Das chose not to write in her mother tongue, Malayalam, but in English. 'When you are writing poetry you should not have too many inhibitions and this society has very powerful inhibitions. I

often feel like I am an Egyptian mummy, tightly wrapped.'

Our interview breaks off because she is due to go and receive a literary award. Is she becoming a part of the establishment? She shrugs. Why don't I come and see?

We arrive at the hall near Trivandrum's famous Padmananhaswamy temple. A series of men get on stage and talk, in Malayalam, about her work. Young women students look on eagerly. Suddenly they all disappear. It's getting dark, they must go home. The men remain, looking stern.

A short man is speaking agitatedly, his voice rising to a crescendo. Finally Kamala informs me: 'This man is saying I am immoral, a corrupter of youth and that my poetry is unintelligible'. But if it's unintel... never mind.

She makes a short speech to the sea of inscrutable faces, thanking them for the award. On the way out she asks 'Why do they do this to me?' But she knows full well the answer. There are so many ways to punish a woman who steps out of line.

Which is greater in Kerala? The price women pay for being 'respectable' or the price for not being so? I know from experience that if you so much as meet the eyes

of a man in public it is seen as an invitation to sexual harassment; and once the system of men and women sitting apart on buses is broken down by over-crowding it's open season for groping. The caution and respectability of Kerala's women is clearly a strategy for avoiding abuse. But it is in itself a kind of abuse – abuse by suffocation rather than violation.

I remember a boat arriving at the hotel at Quilon where I was staying and watching a middle-aged man and a woman in her teens climbing out. They sat down and he ordered a beer.

At the next table some men in a group were drinking. The young woman returned their stares with a casual indifference, jangling a set of keys in her hand. She smiled knowingly as she eavesdropped on their conversation. Her style seemed quite natural and familiar to me.

As she followed the man to his room I found myself torn by conflicting thoughts and feelings. The man was using her body.

But the aura of autonomy about her, of freedom from 'respectability', was undeniable. She was a prostitute but, unlike the 'respectable' Nair women of the past, she was getting paid for it. ■



VANESSA BAIRD



Crossed wires in Calicut

Meeting a mullah in Malabar does not prove that easy...

FIRST it's the increase in headscarves; then the Arabic colleges; then the pink, blue or green mosques; then the men rather than women selling fish along the roadsides. All these things tell me we are getting into Malabar, the northern part of Kerala where 35 per cent of the population is Muslim.

An elephant trundles down the road – it's just an ordinary working elephant but it has a magical, benevolent presence. The landscape of fields and trees is gleaming in the sun. The rains seem to be over at last and people are out sowing seeds in the moist soil of this rich agricultural region. Cattle are drinking water, their horns inexplicably painted blue.

It's early evening when the bus dips down into a hot traffic-jammed bowl called Calicut. The dust, pollution and spasmodically overpowering drainage problem come as a shock. What, I ask a man who turns out to be a bookseller, goes on in Calicut?

He proceeds to tell me that Vasco da Gama – the first European to set foot in India – did so in 1493 a few miles away from here. Er... yes...

He tells me that Calicut gave its name to the Calico cotton Europeans found here. It is also an old port for the spice trade, especially ginger, cardamom and pepper, coming from the nearby hills. As such it

attracted Arab traders who brought Islam to the region in the seventh and eighth centuries AD.

'Lots of tourists come here,' says the bookseller.

'Oh, yes?'

'They stay one night, see there is nothing for them here and move on.'

5.00am in Calicut – also called Kozhikode – and the Muslim call to prayer. It's electronic and very loud. Would it better or worse if I understood what they were saying, I wonder?

Muslims in Kerala were traditionally poorer, less well-educated and culturally more isolated than the Christians or Hindus. This isolation was partly to do with language. The Muslim hierarchy attempted to replace Malayalam with a new dialect based on Arabic. Meanwhile, English – the colonial language – was a complete no-no, being viewed by the mullahs as 'the language of the devil'.

The first outbreaks of hostility towards

Muslims came in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Portuguese colonists and settlers set about wresting control of the spice trade away from them. From then on the position of Muslims in Kerala deteriorated. There were sporadic revolts by Muslim peasants against Hindu landowners, culminating in the bloody Malabar Uprising in 1921.

To get a sense of the position of Muslims in Kerala today I try to meet with community spokespeople – both secular and religious. One contact I am given is a Mr Aharmad at the Mojahid centre near the railway station. I am greeted by a smiling, bearded man, who offers me a chair, some tea, and asks how he can help.

Could he put me in touch with a religious leader? He nods, opens a cupboard and starts to dig around inside it. Funny place to keep a mullah... He reappears with a box full of pamphlets in Arabic and Malayalam and lays them in front of me. I stare at them helplessly. I begin to fear we

RAGHUBIR SINGH / JOHN HILLELSON AGENCY





Time to go home for Muslim schoolgirls in Malabar.

might be having a communication problem.

I find his English hard to understand – he finds mine equally unintelligible. My Malayalam, shamefully, amounts to 10 words taught to me a few days earlier by some patient children. My Arabic simply isn't.

I try again, rephrasing my request. The ever-obliging Mr Aharmad says 'yes' and starts writing, in my notebook, the names of the presidents and secretaries of Muslim organizations in Calicut.

The Islamic Women's Knitting Club, the Koran Reading Group, The Muslim Boys Organization. Every now and again he insists that I read out what he has written to confirm that I can read his writing.

After a while I begin to thank him – but he goes on. Name after name of every conceivable circle, group, club, organization, association. 'Er...', I point to the names, 'Are any of these religious leaders by any chance..?'

He shakes his head and goes on. I final-

ly say thank you I think that's enough – but no, the page turns again and on it goes. I am becoming very concerned with how much energy and good will is going into this completely pointless task.

Finally I halt him in his tracks with what is intended as a fairly innocent question but turns out to have a magical power: 'Do you have any contacts with the ISS?' This is the Islamic Service Society, an extremist militant Muslim fundamentalist group that stands in opposition to the extremist militant Hindu fundamentalist RSS.

The pen is downed, the notebook is handed back to me. 'No, no! No connection! They are extremists! No connection!'

This sounds interesting so I start taking notes, alas, on the same page as the end of the list he has given me. At which point he points to the page and says: 'No, no connection!' I quickly turn over the page. Draw a line. Write 'no connection'. He breathes a sigh of relief and explains: 'We

are cultural, educational. Not political. No connection. No connection.'

We are clearly neither of us linguistically equipped to debate on the definitions of 'the political' – and besides I have clearly stumbled into a minefield of sensitivities.

We part with smiles and thanks and I take an autorickshaw out of Calicut. Some roadside tents along the way remind me how unusual it is to see homelessness in Kerala. The homeless are often migrants from neighbouring states drawn by Kerala's promise of higher wages – but less knowledgeable about the gravity of its unemployment problem. We climb out of the dustbowl and into a surrounding hillside suburb where I am hoping to find Mr MP Mohammed, journalist, novelist and editor of the leftist Kerala Kaumudi Newspaper. Mr Mohammed has a reputation as a progressive and outspoken Muslim – unafraid of angering the hierarchy.

He received death threats for supporting the right to publish Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (although he thinks it's an 'inferior' and 'derivative' book). He was also excommunicated for supporting the feminist campaign for a single family law in India – not separate laws for Hindu, Muslim and Christian women. A single law would improve the position of both Muslim and Christian women.

I ask him about fundamentalism in Kerala. 'I don't call it fundamentalism,' he says. 'It is a corruption of faith. It is all to do with gaining political power. They take things out of the Koran that suit their patriarchal purposes. And for this Muslim women suffer greatly.'

The *Indian Express* has recently carried reports of Keralite Muslim girls falling behind at school either because they are being kept at home to do domestic work or because they have to devote several hours a day to Koranic studies.

I ask MP Mohammed whether Muslims feel discriminated against in present-day Kerala. He thinks carefully before replying: 'Muslims cannot say they have been denied political power – and I have not experienced any discrimination'.

Will this continue to be the case? Later I will learn that 16 people died in clashes between Hindus and Muslims here in Malabar in the aftermath of the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque by Hindu fundamentalists in northern India.

It may take much energy and goodwill from people like Mr Mohammed and Mr Aharmad to convince unhappy Muslims that violence and militancy are not the way to counter the increasing aggressiveness of Hindu fundamentalists.

PEOPLE AND PLACE

Kerala is one of the most densely populated, culturally mixed and politically unusual states in the world.

● It's the size of Switzerland and supports a population of 29 million people. That's 747 people per square kilometre¹ compared with 234 in the UK, 160 in Switzerland, 26 in the US, 21 in Canada, 12 in Aotearoa/New Zealand and 2 in Australia.²

● Of its population 60 per cent are Hindu, 20 per cent are Muslim and 20 per cent are Christian. A small Jewish community of 22 people remains.

● In 1957 Kerala was the first state in the world to bring to power a communist government via democratic elections rather than revolution.

● Over 90 per cent of people in Kerala own the land on which their home stands. Land ownership is limited to eight hectares per family.³

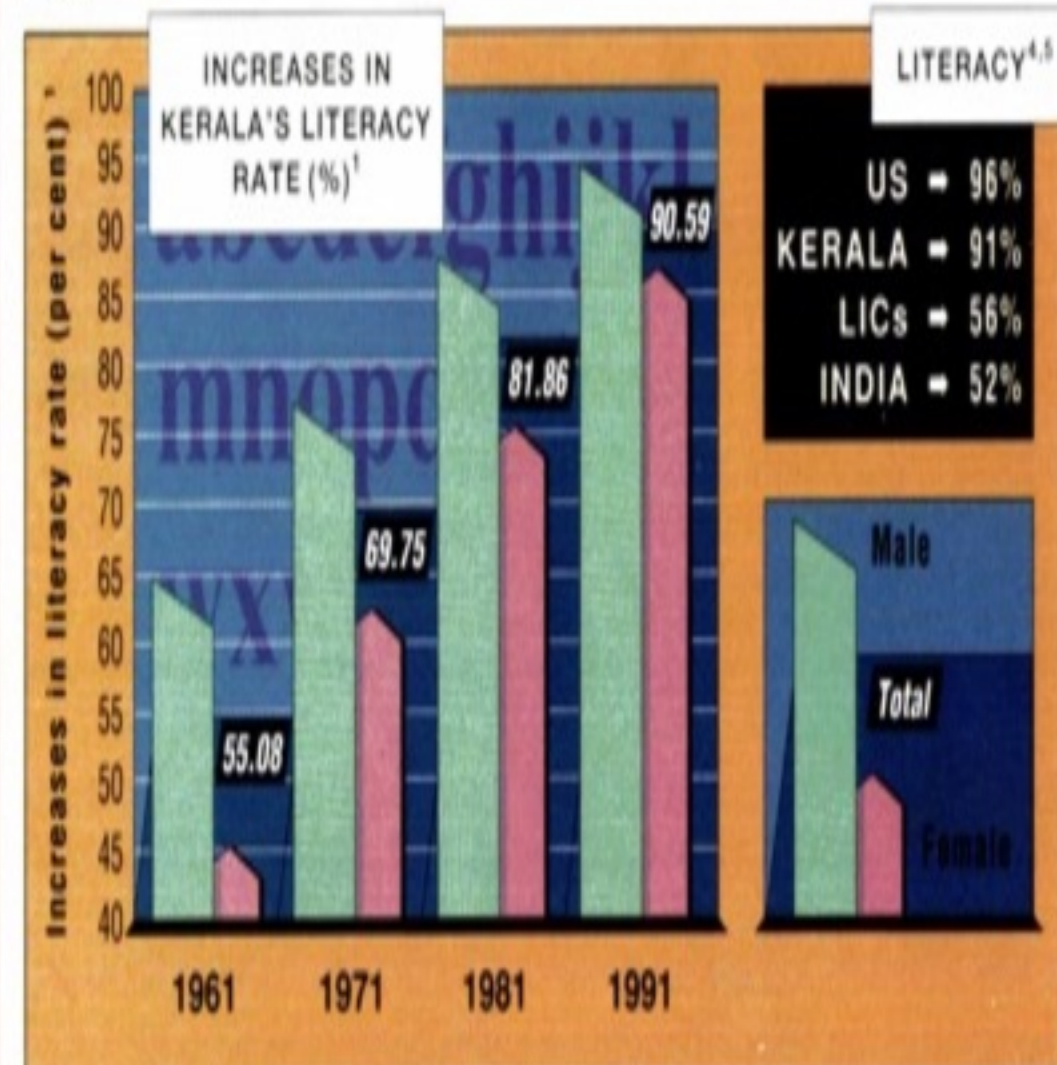


KERALA is a poor state in a poor country. Yet its people have a quality of life that is better than the rest of India or almost any other low-income state. In fact, the quality of life in Kerala is closer to that in the West. But they have achieved it in a most un-Western way...

LITERACY AND EDUCATION

People in Kerala are more educated than in the rest of India and all Low-Income Countries (LICs).

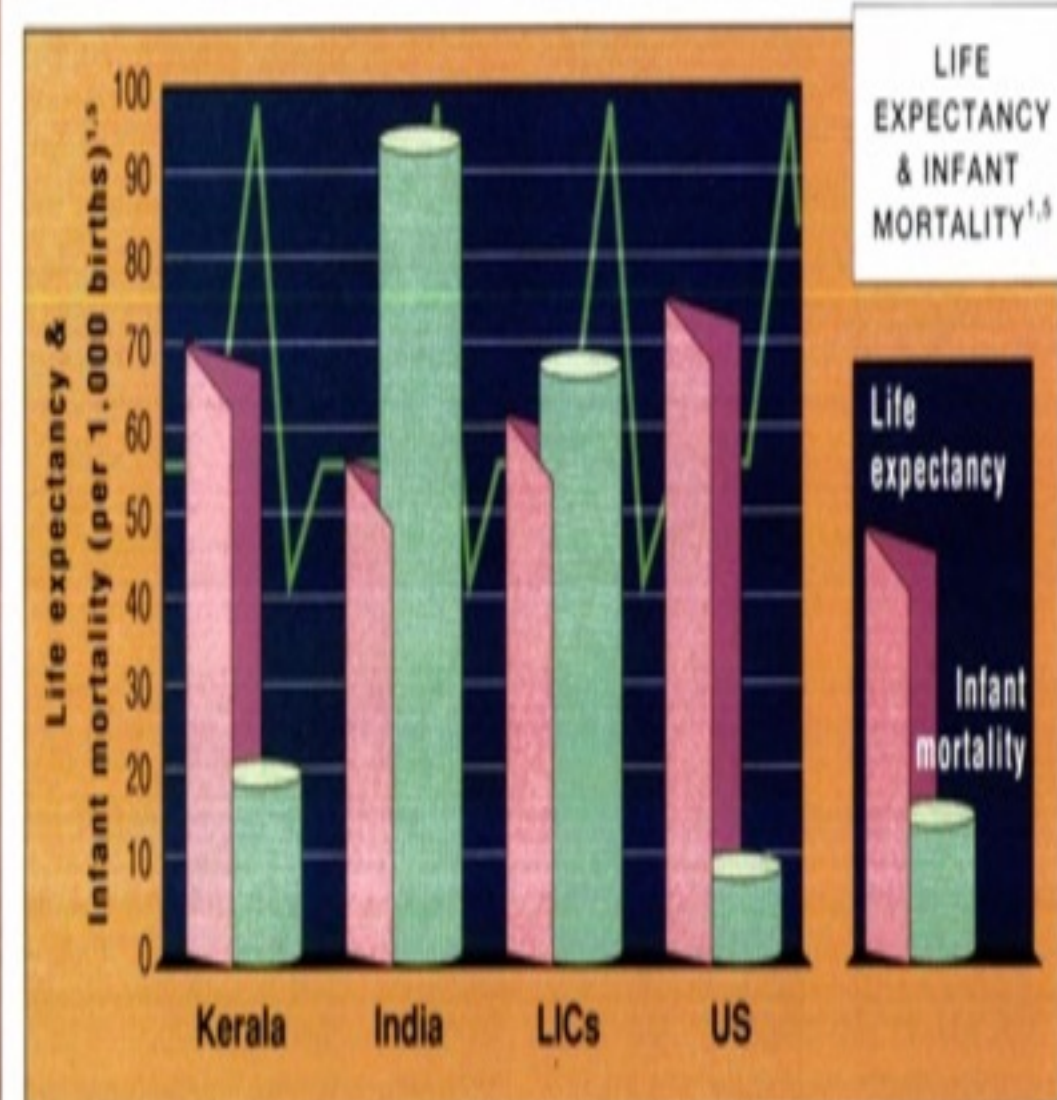
Kerala's literacy rate is higher than that of any Low-Income Country. The only countries in the Third World to have higher literacy are Cuba, Chile and Costa Rica.



● 30 per cent of total state spending is on education.³

LIFE AND HEALTH

People in Kerala live longer – thanks to better nutrition and state health-care provision. Far fewer children die before they reach 12 months of age.



● Fair-price shops and ration cards ensure that two-thirds of the subsidized basic foods go to the poorest 30 per cent. And 99 per cent of Kerala's villages have a fair-price shop within two kilometres.⁶



POLITICS AND PENDULUMS

Electors tend to alternate their vote so that no party stays in power for more than one term. Coalition politics is the norm.

OPPONENTS

● Left Democratic Front (LDF)

Led by the Communist Party Marxist (CPM), it includes other broadly Left groups such as the Communist Party India (CPI), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), the breakaway Congress(S) Party and the anti-caste Janata Dal party. It held power from 1987 to 1991, losing to the United Democratic Front.

● United Democratic Front (UDF)

A loose-knit coalition consisting of centrist groups and communal interests led by the Congress(I) Party and including the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), the pro-caste National Democratic Party (NDP), and the pro-Christian Kerala Congress (KC). Its term of office since June 1991 has been characterized by fierce infighting.

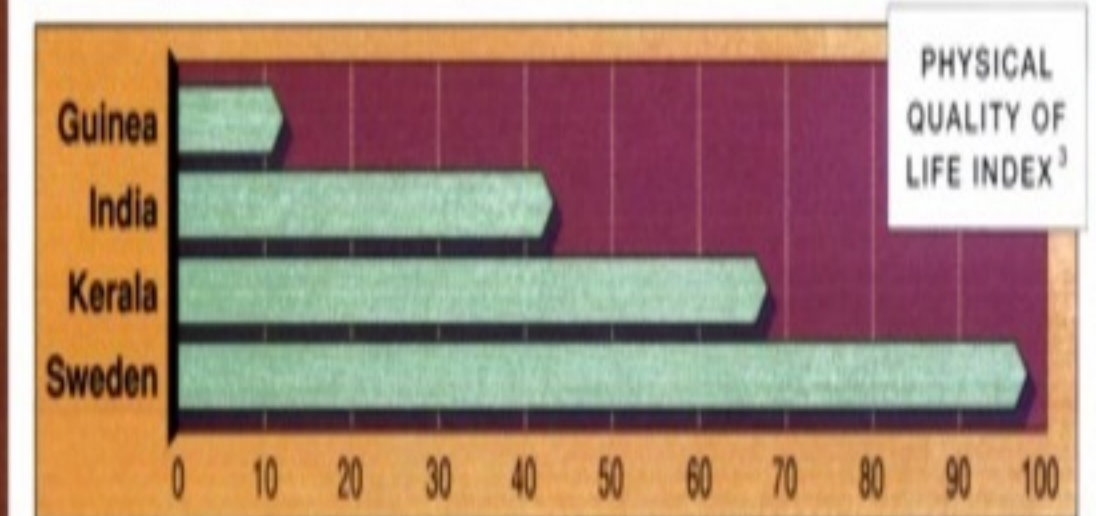
● Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

Seen as the Hindu fundamentalist party, neither the LDF or UDF are willing to include it in their coalition.

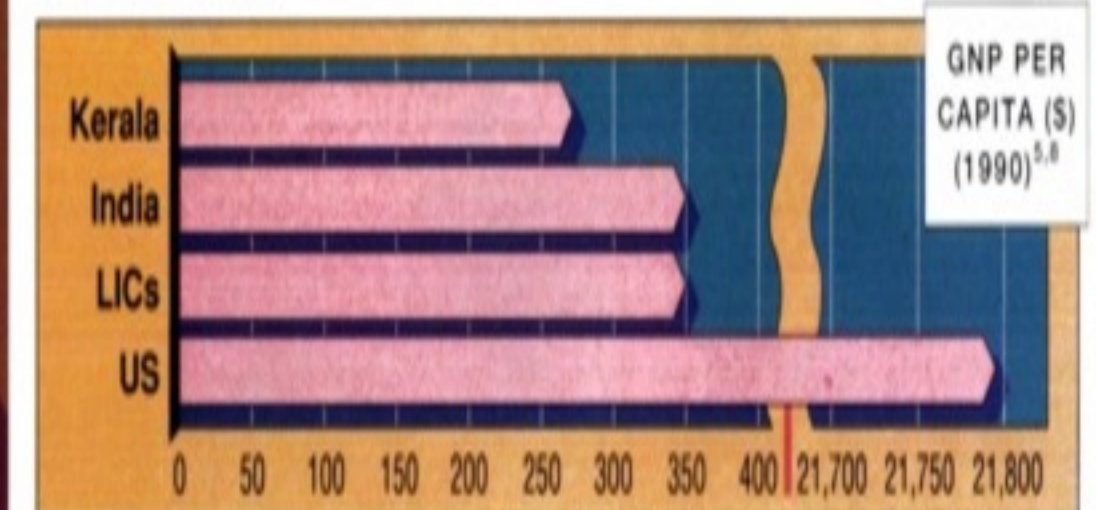


QUALITY AND ECONOMY

Kerala's quality of life is comparatively high.



But in conventional economic terms it is a poor state – lagging behind the rest of India.



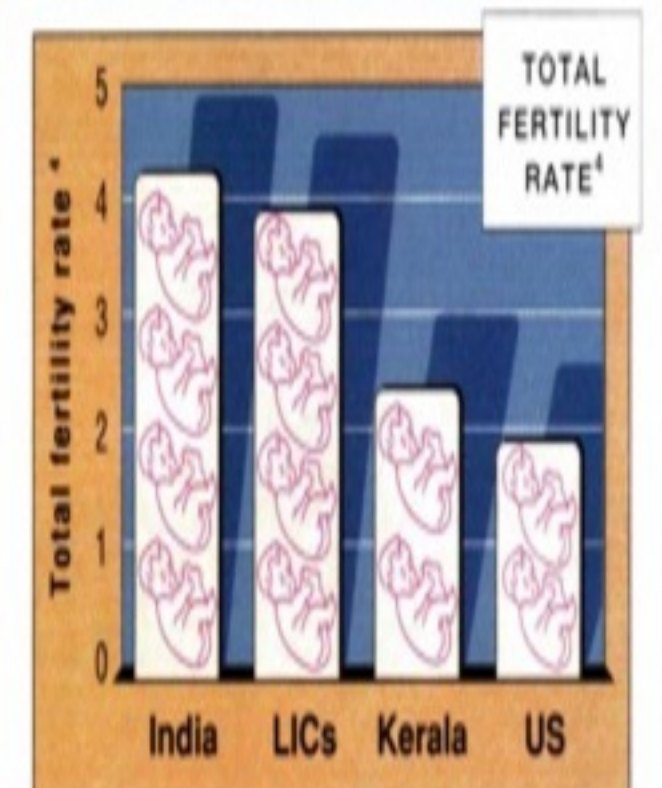
● Kerala manages to maintain high consumption and low productivity thanks to remittances from workers in the Gulf which equal 20 to 25 per cent of the state domestic product. Only two per cent of this is invested in commercial ventures. Most of it is spent on land, houses, cars or jewellery.^{8,3}

WOMEN AND SOCIETY

The position of women is generally better than in other parts of India or other Low-Income Countries – because they are better educated and have fewer children.

● 94 per cent of primary-age girls and 99 per cent of primary-age boys are in school.³

● There are more females than males enrolled in arts and sciences pre-degree, degree and graduated courses – a total of 82,538 women and 73,516 men in 1990-1.¹



WORK AND RESOURCES

● Coir (coconut fibre) accounts for 18 per cent of exports and supports 10 million people in Kerala.¹

● Major exports include rubber, pepper, cardamom, ginger, coffee, tea, cashews.

● In 1986 women accounted for 28 per cent of Government employees and 36 per cent of employees in organized economic entities.³

● An estimated 150,000 Keralites are working in the Gulf. Many are skilled technicians and medical staff.

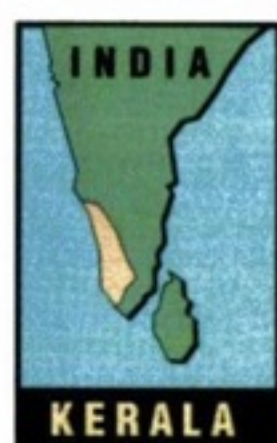
● Unemployment is the highest in India, with an estimated four million job seekers. 63.8 per cent of educated job-seekers were unemployed in 1991.^{7,1}



1 *Economic Review 1991*, Government of Kerala State Planning Board. 2 *The Economist Book of Vital World Statistics*, (Hutchinson 1990). 3 *Politics, Women and Wellbeing*, Robin Jeffrey (Macmillan 1992). 4 'Kerala Elections, 1991: Lessons and Non-Lessons', Thomas Isaac and S Mohana Kumar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 November 1991. 5 *World Development Report 1992*, World Bank. 6 Kerala: *Radical Reform as Development in an Indian State*, Richard W Franke and Barbara H Chasin (Food First Books 1991). 7 *Indian Express*, 30 August 1992, quoting the Applied Research Department of the State Government. 8 Kerala figure supplied by the Institute of Development Studies in Trivandrum.



GAELE ROUX (INSET) / VANESSA BAIRD



Hills of shame

*Up into the highlands to see the tribal peoples of Wynad
– and another Kerala altogether...*

THE bus driver is an even-handed psychopath. As he speeds up through densely inhabited areas or around mountain-clinging hairpin bends his hatred seems to be equally distributed between pedestrians diving for shelter and passengers mentally preparing to meet their Maker. If only he seemed to be enjoying himself one might take some vicarious pleasure in that. But no, his face expresses nothing but surly rage, pathological fury.

The countryside flashes past, beautiful, tantalizing at all angles. We wind upwards through rubber plantations – the light-barked trees with their little cups attached – proof of the common Keralite complaint that land is being turned over to cash cropping.

We are travelling up into the highland

forest area of Wynad, in the Western Ghats, which reaches as high as 1,200 metres above sea level. As we climb the temperature drops and wonderful cool wafts hit our faces every time we pass one of the many streams pouring down the rock-face just a few feet from the bus window.

It's this sort of thing that gives Wynad the name 'the Kashmir of Southern India'. But Wynad has other characteristics. It is a pocket of poverty, inequality and deprivation in a state that prides itself on its social programmes. The literacy rate, for example, is low compared with the rest of the state – estimates range from 40 to 58 per cent as opposed to the 90 to 100 per cent elsewhere.

Why have the people of Wynad missed out? The main reason is that 25 per cent of the population are the indigenous or 'tribal'

people of Kerala, squeezed onto marginal land by settlers over the years – and up until recently ignored by the state government. In spite of land reform and distribution elsewhere in Kerala, 30 per cent of tribal families are still landless. Among certain groups – such as the Paniyas – landlessness is twice as high.

The uncomfortable reality is that over 90 per cent of tribal people in Kerala are living below the poverty line. It is this record that gives Wynad another name – 'Africa in Kerala'. And it's no coincidence that it was here – in what was densely forested highland that Ajitha and her fellow Naxalites hoped to start a revolution in the late 1960s.

Wynad has yet another identity: Kerala's Siberia. This is the state to which incompetent, corrupt or simply unpopular

officials are sent. 'It's a form of punishment,' says Lukose Jacob, an activist for indigenous people, who have not been helped by this one bit.

We are not stopping in Wynad right now but going a bit further to Gudalur in the Nilgiri Hills just over the border in Tamil Nadu. We – that is freelance photographer Gaelle Roux and me – have planned to meet up with activist and journalist Mari Marcel Thekaekara. It is from this region that she used to write her *Letter from Tamil Nadu* column for the *NI*. Mari and her husband Stan run a project called Accord for *adivasi* or tribal people.

As we cross the border into Tamil Nadu the physical change is dramatic. The asphalt road from Kerala gives way to a deeply rutted, potholed gesture of a road. The countryside looks different too. Suddenly we are in a region of truly vast tea plantations (some owned by Brooke Bond) fringed with rough temporary-looking shacks in which plantation workers live. Gone are the proud little painted houses of Kerala, each with its garden growing coconut trees, tapioca and bananas; looking established, settled. Here instead are people dependent on the great estates; people who are insecure, expendable, and whose passage on this earth is particularly transient. Thin, undernourished women make their way back at dusk from work in the tea plantations – to another day's work at home.

Night has fallen by the time we reach Gudalur and are met by Mari and Stan at the Adivasi Hospital they helped set up. That evening we hear about the situation of tribal people in Tamil Nadu, we listen to tales of ruthless exploitation and cruelty towards a people who are innocent of devious ways. We hear of the ease with which settlers have managed to get them to part with land deeds – 'I will look after them for you or the white ants will get them' – and how exploitation is made easy by high rates of illiteracy among the *adivasi*.

The cruelty takes the form not just of land grabbing but also of murder and police brutality. Little by little, and from various sources, I will hear how much Accord has done to help tribal people defend themselves and restore some of the dignity that had been taken away from them.

Accord's main achievement has been getting land titles – and making sure that they are safeguarded. When we visit the offices the next day we are greeted with the news that yet another *adivasi* community has – through Accord and its lawyer – won a long legal battle for land rights.

Next day we cross the border back into Kerala where the situation of tribal people is supposed to be better than in Tamil Nadu. They are better educated and therefore more able to defend themselves. The Left parties have taken steps towards the

Kunji, aged 65: 'Non-tribal people grabbed our land, they taught our young people to reject traditional customs and ways of dressing' (left).

The clean compounds, traditional houses and ubiquitous children of Punjavayal (right).



GAELLE ROUX

Saradha, an agricultural labourer: 'As Mulukurumba people we are treated with more respect than the Paniyas.'

restoration of tribal land – but implementation has been weak. And land shortage is critical, forcing tribal people into unofficial bonded labour.

Our guide Subramaniam takes us to people of his community – the Mulukurumba. The first village looks wonderful, with its clean compounds and houses made of local materials, blending into the countryside. The Mulukurumba are comparatively well off. More literate and more likely to hold a patch of land per family than other tribal groups, they can command greater respect from non-tribal people. They live by growing rice, which they eat, and coffee, ginger and pepper, which they sell.

With Subramaniam acting as go-between and interpreter I set about trying to interview people. Finding people prepared to be interviewed is not easy. It's not that they are hiding in their houses – quite the opposite. They have all come out to be entertained. The circus has come to town

and they haven't the least intention of boring on about their lives – they want to enjoy the spectacle.

And here it is: funny people, with funny white skin, a funny language and odd bits of electronic gadgetry. When I do eventually get some interviews it's in front of an audience of scores – not quite the setting for intimate questions about social relationships, problems with alcohol, and how you get on with your husband. Even a question like: 'Are you married?' produces a ripple of embarrassed giggles.

Things get better – but I feel I'm coming hard up against the limits of transcultural journalism. To get anything more than a superficial, presented sense of people's lives you need to be able to become almost invisible, to disappear into the background. And – of course – to be trusted.

But why should they trust you? They have been cheated and exploited time and again as a result of their openness. Why should they open their hearts, their lives, to any passing juggler?

We drive on. There are more cleared spaces than woods now. The woods that gave tribal people everything – their knowledge, their livelihoods, their sense of belonging – have almost gone. The settlers

GAELLE ROUX

moved in and planted cash crops.

At Sultan's Battery we stop and a Protestant priest comes up to us. He thinks I'm photographing his church. In fact I'm framing a poster of near-naked beefcake in front of which a man on a motorbike is talking to two women. The church is just the background.

On establishing my nationality the priest exclaims: 'Ah England. Our mother!' My God, I think, get me out of here. He goes on. 'It's terrible, terrible about Princess Diana. She's a disgrace, a disgrace

to the Royal Family.' Thankfully he soon says his goodbyes and disappears.

Lukose Jacob tells us about the literacy programme he and others were running for *adivasis* in the area before the current centre-right state Government took over.

'It's useless now,' he says. 'They don't use methods or materials appropriate to the tribal people. They don't pay the teachers. It's a failure. They should just leave it to us if they can't do it properly.'

We hit the road again and head for Mananthavady. Along the way we come

across cramped settlements of Paniya people. These are the poorest and most oppressed of the tribal people – 70 per cent are landless and 95 per cent are illiterate.

A long tradition of low self-esteem hangs about their necks. A 'paniya' means 'one who does work'. These people have been inhabitants of Wynad since 4,000 BC. They were taken as slaves by the conquerors who arrived 1,500 years ago. Legend says they became slaves when their forebears were asked to which caste they belonged and replied 'the lowest of all castes' – since then they have worked in the paddy fields of those with greater power.

Near Mananthavady is Valliyakoorkava Temple where such Paniyas used to be sold as slaves. Nearby is Solidarity, another tribal organization. A woman I hoped to see is away at a demonstration held earlier today. It was in protest against non-tribal men who sexually exploit tribal women and then deny responsibility for the pregnancies that ensue. I am reminded of what Mari said about the image of tribal people as exotic, erotic. Tribal women are seen as erotic because traditionally they are bare-shouldered, unlike other Indian women. And it's not taboo for tribal women to drink alcohol – which makes them easier to seduce or assault.

The people at Solidarity are quite critical of state policy towards tribal people. The main neglect is the failure to ensure that landless *adivasis* should at least receive the 20 square metres of land stipulated by the 1969 Land Reform. If there is not enough land to do this, says Solidarity, it should be taken away from cash-cropping companies (some of them state-owned) that are violating the 16-hectare upper limit on company holdings. The state has also interfered directly by destroying tribal houses in some parts of Kerala and replacing them with unsuitable – and unwelcome – brick houses. Attitude is clearly a problem.

Subramaniam has family on both sides of the border – in Kerala and in Tamil Nadu. So which side is better? He pauses a long while before answering.

'It used to be much better in Kerala. But I think things are now better in Tamil Nadu because we have Accord to defend ourselves with and there is more land.'

Kerala cannot increase its land surface. But the irony is stark. When it came to dividing up the land more equally among its people, who got left out? The people who had lived on the land longest and had the greatest physical and spiritual need for it.

That's the immensely sad and shameful story of indigenous people the world over. And it's a story that can only be rewritten by indigenous people in their own organizations – with the support of others prepared to open their eyes, hearts and minds. ■

Breakfast with the birds. Native hill people eat mainly rice and sell the ginger and pepper they grow.



RAGHUBIR SINGH / JOHN HILLELSON AGENCY



VANESSA BAIRD



The mat unravels

Consorting with an industrialist produces some unexpected insights into Kerala's 'labour problem'...

BLUE, yellow, red. Primary colours vibrate in the old port of Fort Cochin. Shipping agents and traders do deals in small open-fronted shops in the narrow winding streets by the sea's edge — talking over neat piles of rice, spice and *bidis*.

This place is a microcosm of the cultural influences that make up present day Kerala. The shop names are Hindu, Muslim, Syrian, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxon, Jewish. In fact the busiest area is the brilliant warren of streets called Jew Town — at the heart of which is the 2,000-year-old site of a synagogue. The great Chinese fishing nets rise and fall with monotonous regularity while in the background the modern port of Cochin enters the fifteenth day of a strike over containerization.

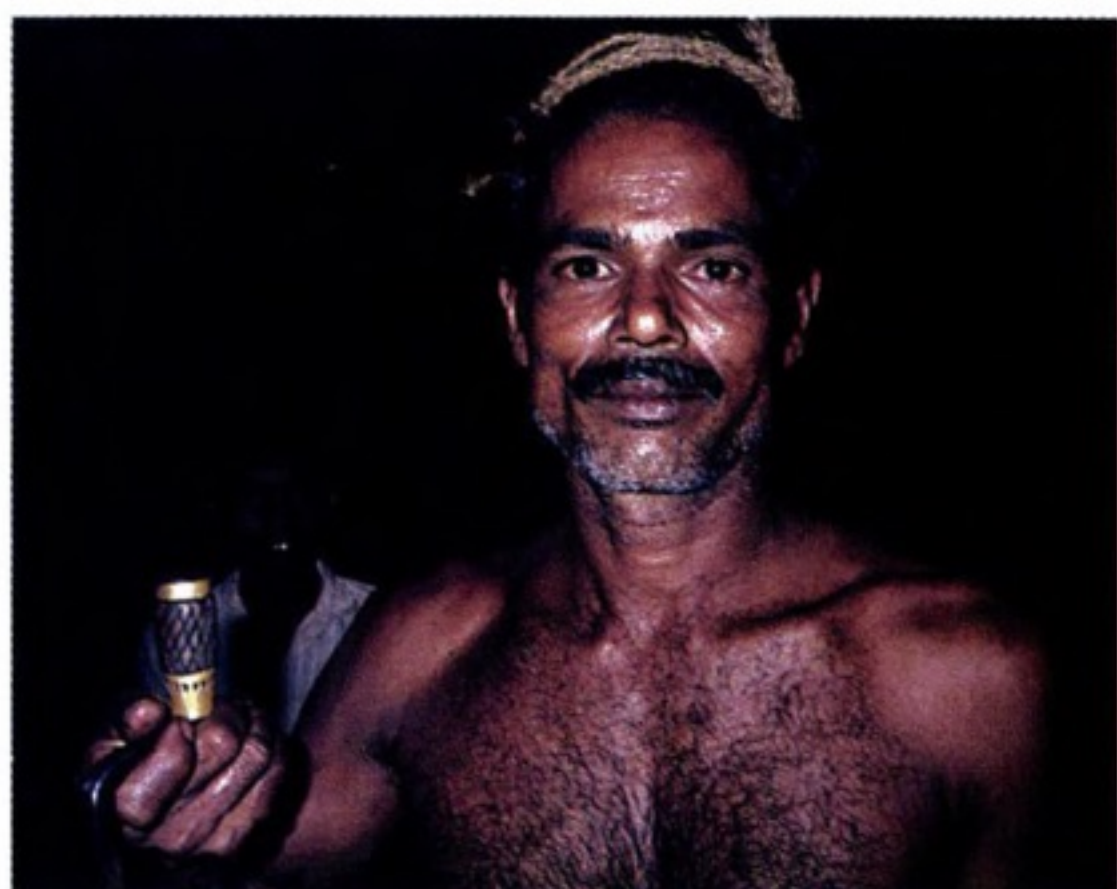
But what puzzles me right now is what is going on behind the big metal gates of a waterside concern calling itself Prima. I can see women and men in a courtyard heaving golden brown bales which I take to be coir — coconut fibre — to be made into doormats.

I know that it was coir workers who created the first trade unions in Kerala. I also know that coir employs half a million people and accounts for nearly one-fifth of Kerala's exports.

So what, I wonder, is the situation of coir workers today? What have they reaped from the changes wrought by their parents and grandparents?

After a few attempts I get past the guard at the gate and find myself being led down a corridor of Prima's HQ. The powerful fans make a pleasant respite from

VANESSA BAIRD



Coconut-tree climber: 'Of course I belong to a union... it's the communist agricultural workers' union'.

the heat outside.

In his large office is Mr Mathew Joseph, Managing Director. We get talking about Kerala's infamous 'labour problem'. It is commonly said in India that Kerala is over-politicized; its unions are too militant; its workers are paid too much; and there are too many strikes. That's why nobody wants to invest here, the theory runs. Even Keralites who have made their fortunes in the Gulf don't want to.

Is it true that you can't do business in Kerala? Mathew Joseph shakes his head and smiles. 'North Indians say that. They are used to getting workers for 15 or 16 rupees a day, who live on the streets and don't know their rights. You don't get that in Kerala. Labour is expensive here but you can do business and if you are prepared to pay decent wages you won't get strikes.'

Prima pay their workers 60-70 rupees a day — about 50 per cent above the state legal minimum — with equal pay for men and women. 'We have good industrial relations because it's a family business for everyone. Everyone here inherits their parents' jobs as I inherited mine.'

Most of the workers belong to the communist agricultural workers' union, whose leader is described by Mathew Joseph as 'a true communist' who 'lives a simple life and is incorruptible'.

Sounds good so far — and it gets better.

'We are exporting a lot more coir now because it appeals to the "green" market — especially in Europe. Coir products are completely natural — no synthetics are used. They are handmade, labour intensive and biodegradable.'

Can I see how they are produced? Can I talk to some of the workers? Sure.

We set out the next day. Mathew Joseph has decided to accompany me. The worker-friendly, eco-friendly mat begins to unravel just a little when we arrive at the first factory just outside Alleppey. In the middle of a vast room is a new mechanized loom. But I thought the mats were handmade...?

'We are moving over to mechanization slowly,' Mathew Joseph explains. 'If we went straight for full mechanization we could get a loom that could be operated by one man instead of ten. This loom can be operated by two instead of four.'

Won't there be job losses?

'Not immediately,' says Mathew Joseph. 'But in five or six years time we may have to shed about 30 per cent of the staff.'

We leave the factory and set out for the next location, picking up a man called Joy Varghese on the way. He starts telling us about a big problem he's got. His father died a year ago and he needs to find dowries for his four sisters. We stop at the family home and meet his mother, who says she disapproves of the dowry system. What do her friends think about it? She looks shocked. 'Oh, we do not discuss such things with friends. These are private, family matters.'

Joy Varghese begins to fit into the jigsaw as I learn that he is a subcontractor to Prima. He has 60 workers. Prima directly employs only 550 workers — indirectly about 25,000 are employed, Mathew Joseph now confides.

We make our way down sandy tracks through a coconut forest to Joy Varghese's looms. An old man called PV Karanakaran is weaving. Eight years ago he had to sell his own loom to pay a bribe for his nephew to get a job. He now earns 35 rupees a day. Can he live on that? Barely, he says.

Nearby a woman called Leela is preparing coir for the loom. She earns 12 rupees a day.

Unloading coir at Cochin. Exports have risen to 37,000 tonnes.



What? That's worse than the street dwellers earn in north India. 'Yes, it's very little,' admits Joseph.

Does she belong to a union? No. Why not? She doesn't want to. Her employer is known to her, she says. It isn't necessary.

As we walk on it becomes clear that for Mathew Joseph the joy of Joy Varghese is that he 'takes on the labour problem'. The fewer workers Prima has on its payroll the better. 'There is always the danger that the unions will get strong again,' he says.

Dusk is falling when we reach a plantation owned by Prima. We are greeted by another subcontractor. A tall ageing man, with an 'I'm worried about business' look etched into his face.

What follows is a bit of a performance. First a climber goes up the tree with extraordinary agility, feet bound together with fibre, a blade hooked on his shoulder. He brings down a big green coconut and cracks it open, revealing the husk with its inner fibre.

We then move to the 'retting' pools where the husks lie for four to five months to soften, naturally bathed by alternating tides of salt and fresh water. The bacteria that soften the husks live in fresh water and breed in salty.

When ready the soggy husks are pulled out of the water and taken to a group of women who beat them. This is the hardest, worst-paid job and a lot of the women suffer from a prolapsed uterus because of the squatting position they adopt.

Sarojuina is 55. She's a fast worker and earns 18 rupees a day. 'It's hard to live on this — and the work is painful. But hunger is more painful,' she says.

She does not belong to a union. Mathew Joseph tells me that many people are reluctant to join unions because they fear being branded as militants and losing their jobs.

Can this really be Kerala?

Finally I get to speak to the coconut-tree climber. How much does he earn? 90 rupees a day. Does he belong to a union? 'Of course,' he replies. 'I don't want to be exploited.'

His big ambition is for his children to get government jobs. And they might, interjects Mathew Joseph, because of the Indian Government policy of reserving a quota of jobs for people from the low or 'scheduled' castes.

At last. A person whom radical reform has invested with confidence and self-esteem — enough to make him feel he has the right to a living wage and to have plans and ambitions.

Otherwise what happens? Mathew Joseph passes the labour problem onto Joy Varghese and Joy Varghese passes his dowry problem on to the women who are beating their uteruses into prolapse for the sum of 18 rupees a day. ■

HARRY GRUYAERT / MAGNUM

Developmania

Which is the best route out of poverty? Here are five main – and mainly conflicting – theories.

APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY

Many advocates in environmental movements. Barefoot doctors and inexpensive biogas plants using animal waste are good – high-tech medical centres and large dam projects are bad.

RADICAL REFORM

A modified version of revolutionary theory. It supports radical redistribution of wealth and the need to develop the public sector in poor countries – but does not insist on revolution.

BASIC NEEDS

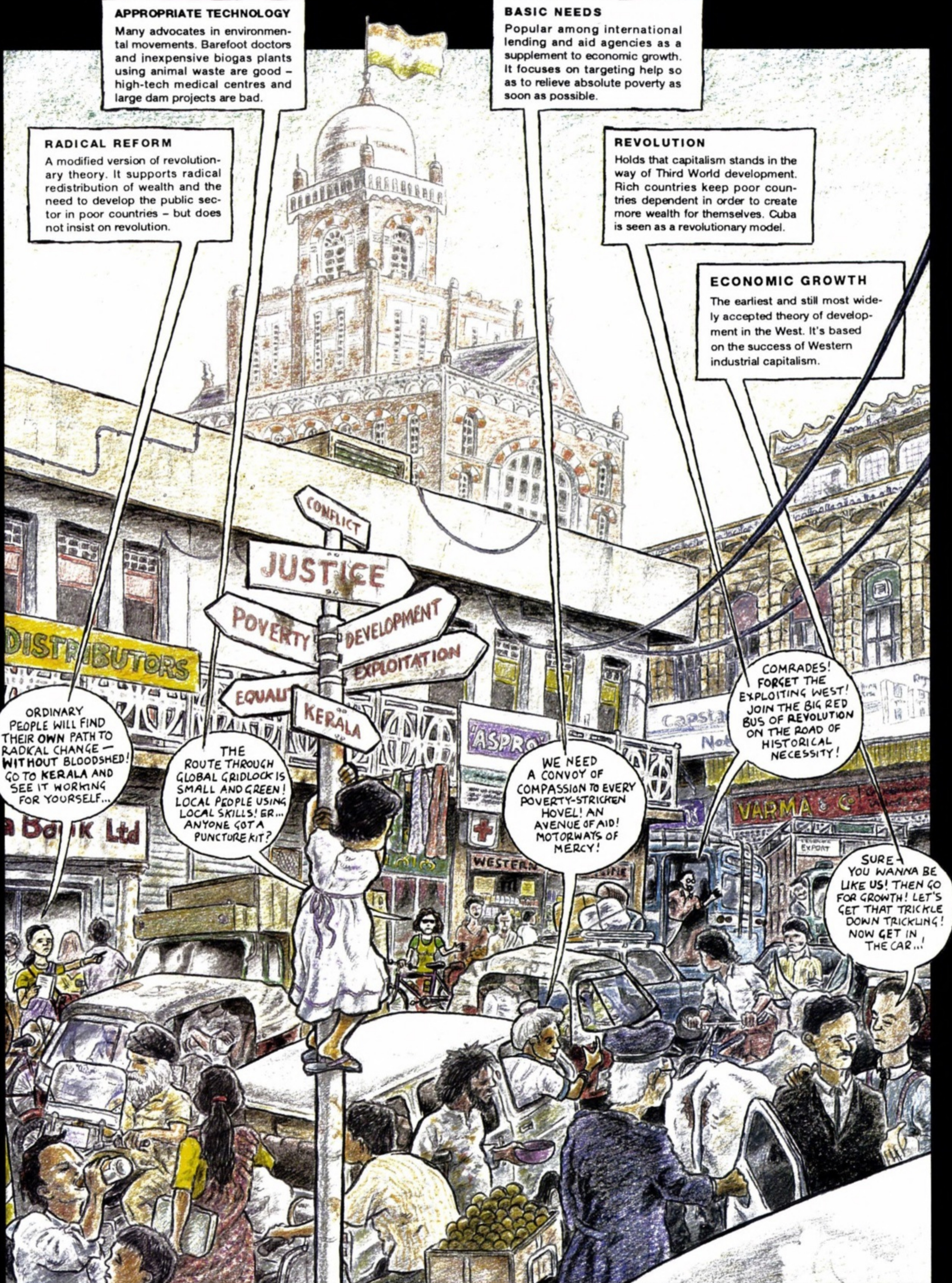
Popular among international lending and aid agencies as a supplement to economic growth. It focuses on targeting help so as to relieve absolute poverty as soon as possible.

REVOLUTION

Holds that capitalism stands in the way of Third World development. Rich countries keep poor countries dependent in order to create more wealth for themselves. Cuba is seen as a revolutionary model.

ECONOMIC GROWTH

The earliest and still most widely accepted theory of development in the West. It's based on the success of Western industrial capitalism.



ORDINARY PEOPLE WILL FIND THEIR OWN PATH TO RADICAL CHANGE – WITHOUT BLOODSHED! GO TO KERALA AND SEE IT WORKING FOR YOURSELF...

THE ROUTE THROUGH GLOBAL GRIDLOCK IS SMALL AND GREEN! LOCAL PEOPLE USING LOCAL SKILLS! ER... ANYONE GOT A PUNCTURE KIT?

WE NEED A CONVOY OF COMPASSION TO EVERY POVERTY-STRICKEN HOVEL! AN AVENUE OF AID! MOTORWAYS OF MERCY!

COMRADES! FORGET THE EXPLOITING WEST! JOIN THE BIG RED BUS OF REVOLUTION ON THE ROAD OF HISTORICAL NECESSITY!

SURE – YOU WANNA BE LIKE US! THEN GO FOR GROWTH! LET'S GET THAT TRICKLE DOWN TRICKLING! NOW GET IN THE CAR...



Model or muddle?

Journey's end: time to ask if Kerala really is the success story it's cracked up to be, and to do a bit of star gazing...

So the million-rupee question: is Kerala a model for development? Probably not in the sense that it provides a blueprint that can be applied anywhere; Kerala has too many historical and cultural peculiarities for that.

But I wonder whether it's really wise to think in terms of 'a model' anyway? A model suggests something rigid and I would have thought one of the lessons that can be learned from socialism this century is that rigidity is not a good thing.

Individual 'lessons', however, Kerala can definitely provide. The first is that good, radical land reform has to be the first step. Second, that literacy and popular participation are the way to set in motion and sustain radical social change. Kerala also teaches less obvious lessons – that apparent paradoxes can live happily together, for example.

New politics

But the political Left in Kerala faces a new challenge today. The changing world order, the collapse of Eastern Europe, have all taken their toll here too.

'I think the leftist movement depended too much on official communism and it will take a few years before such a politics can take shape again,' says Bishop Paulos



GAELLE ROUX

It's easy to be critical in Kerala when you are there and listening to the criticisms of Keralites. It is outrageous that land reform has excluded so many native people. Women's liberation should mean a lot more than access to health, education and jobs. And workers' rights must include those of rural contract labour in the coir industry.

But if you stand back a bit and look at Kerala in the context of the rest of India – or low-income countries worldwide – its success in meeting the basic needs of its people is astounding. People here live much longer, are better educated and have more rights than anywhere else in India. Their expectations are high; so are the standards by which they judge success.

Whatever their political allegiance most

people will proudly regale the achievements of communism. When I ask a researcher at the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum how I can get in touch with a self-avowed conservative, he looks perplexed and then explains that he does not think anybody in Kerala would describe themselves as a conservative. 'Everybody likes to think of themselves as "progressive".'

There's hypocrisy, complacency, a reluctance to tackle remaining pockets of inequality – but nowhere do I get even an inkling of the brutal New Right conviction found almost everywhere else these days that if some people are poor and marginalized then it's got to be their own fault. And you see more homelessness on the streets of London than in Trivandrum.

Mar Gregorios. He's an oddball, labelled 'the red bishop' on the grounds of his commitment to social justice – and a 'conservative' on the grounds of his commitment to Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

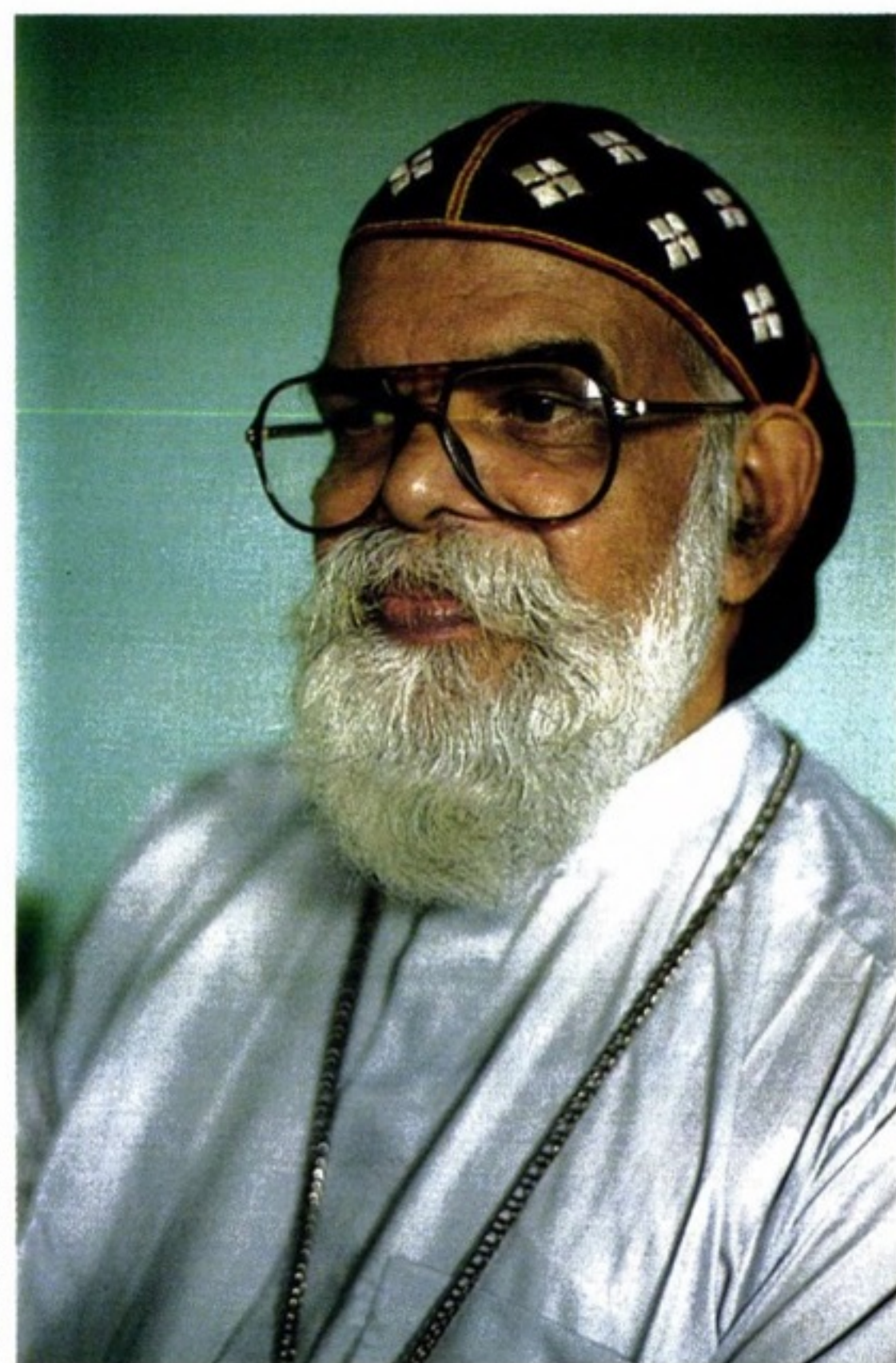
He goes on: 'The communist parties are suffering from having been patriarchal in their administration for so long. It has meant that they have been unable to renew their leadership. The older leaders made tremendous sacrifices, they were jailed, starved – they threw themselves into communism. So whatever they say goes. The younger ones have had to do none of these things – and they fail to inspire people.'

'Of course literacy and land reform have been great achievements. Leftist education has ensured that people know that there is injustice, they know the structures that create poverty and oppression. And today there is very little abject poverty in Kerala.'

'But there are still injustices. People know this but nothing much is being done. We are slipping into a kind of smugness. Political processes have become extremely cheap with people – especially in the current government – doing anything to come to power and to cling to power. I am afraid that the restless striving for a new society has almost gone... Now everything, including education, is seen in terms of climbing the economic ladder.'

I think of his words as I walk through the chaotic traffic-ridden streets of Trivandrum, past the bookshops, the tailors, the drapers selling homespun *khadi*, the watch-menders, the chemists selling

The 'red bishop' Paulos Mar Gregorios.



HARRY GRUYAERT / MAGNUM

Red, radical and proud – Kerala's voters swing between left and centre. The right – so far – remains mainly out of sight.

traditional Ayurvedic herbal medicines. All these show India at its self-reliant best.

But a little further on are the luxury shops selling imported watches and gold jewellery at exorbitant prices. With India taking the IMF/World Bank route to development there are going to be a hell of a lot more of them. India aims to get a nine-billion-dollar loan from the IMF in exchange for dropping many import tariffs under a policy of 'economic liberalization', and imposing IMF-style 'structural adjustment'. This means cutting public spending – especially on health and education.

For many Keralites it's a final sell-out to neo-imperialism, to the New World Order dictated by the West, and a jettisoning of the last bits of Gandhism.

To grow or not to grow

Meanwhile Keralites are consuming a lot – helped by remittances from the Gulf – and producing very little. The economy is stagnating in crucial areas, growing only very slowly in others.

Does this matter? What's so great about growth? After all, the usual lesson drawn from Kerala is that even with minimum economic growth redistribution of wealth can ensure that people's basic needs are met.

But Left economists are beginning to rethink this. Thomas Isaac, at the Centre for Development Studies, reckons that: 'In the absence of economic growth in Kerala today the maintenance of the gains of the past is becoming difficult.'

He sees a backlash developing, fuelled by theories that the Left is very good for redistribution but no good for growth. 'These theories say that the Left in Kerala

has done its historical duty and should now make way for new forces of growth.'

And what does the Left say to that?

'We say that the organizations and institutions that have contributed to higher political consciousness and to the gains produced by redistribution can be used to activate economic growth itself,' Isaac says.

How?

'Normally in a society where the means of production are owned by private interests there are limited options for peoples' organizations to intervene in their production process. But in Kerala these captains of industry and agriculture have clearly failed to activate growth and therefore the people's organizations are saying "you have failed – but let's try doing it together".'

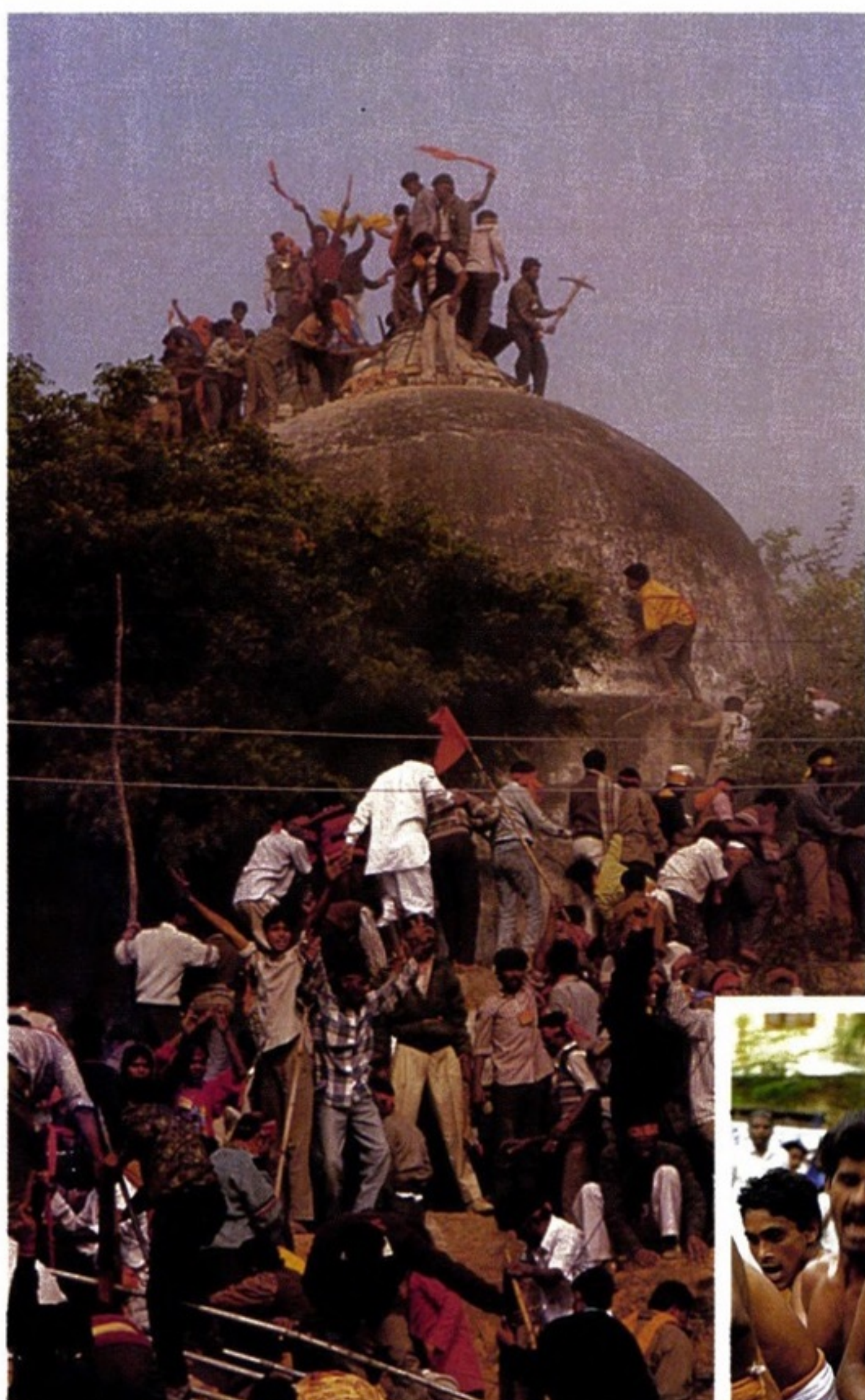
What does this mean – people's participation in aggressive industrialization? Big factories?

'We are saying "yes" to large factories – but that does not mean any large factory. We want industry that links up with small industries – to create a more balanced kind of development.'

The kinds of industries the Left are looking to encourage are high-value and will provide work for an educated labour force – electronic engineering for example.

And there is also strong emphasis on industry that is clean and green. As we have seen, the challenge of the past was equal distribution of the main resource, land. The challenge of today and the future is environmental protection of natural resources for the benefit of all.

In this respect Kerala is fortunate in having the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat (KSSP) – a 'people's science' movement



Hindu fanatics raze a Muslim mosque in Ayodhya, northern India. Thousands died nationwide in the rioting that followed (left). Kerala's peace activists use street theatre to mobilize the masses against sectarian violence (below).



that not only spearheaded the literacy campaign but also led a successful mass mobilization against a big dam project in Kerala's Silent Valley.

Combining red with green politics may be the greatest long-term challenge facing Kerala. But the greatest immediate concern – raised again and again by the people I meet during my stay – is combating the spread of sectarian violence, the clash of Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists.

It's an issue that is being addressed here in a typically Keralite, typically radical and imaginative way.

Social harmony

A man screams. He is surrounded by others who appear to be beating him. What we are witnessing is a scene of sectarian violence. The crowd – made up largely of children on their way to school – just looks on.

With reason. It's what we are all supposed to do. This is the KSSP doing their usual thing – raising awareness on the burning issues of the day by use of *jathas* or street theatre.

We are in Poovachal, a village south of Trivandrum not far from where a clash between Muslims and Hindus recently claimed six lives. Clashes like that can be found all over India, especially in the wake of the Ayodhya incident in which Hindu fundamentalists destroyed a mosque. In

Kerala, though, it's a new phenomenon.

Kerala's tradition of religious tolerance and social harmony is not a myth. 'Incidents of communal violence were unheard of here up until a few months ago. You honestly did not know or care which community a person came from – whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish...', a Poovachal woman tells me as we watch the street drama unfold. 'But now it's a question people are beginning to ask.'

Why now? To some extent sectarianism is being imported from other parts of India, particularly the North, but there are also some specifically Keralite reasons for the upsurge.

'We have a very high rate of unemployment and so a large section of disappointed youth,' KSSP activist Dr B Ekbal explains. 'Some of this disenchanted youth is being politically manipulated by political parties like the [Hindu nationalist] BJP. We – the secular forces – failed to see this happening. What we have to do now is mobilize this youth. We have to rally secular and

peace-loving people.'

With the first signs of sectarian violence spreading to Kerala last year the KSSP launched their action, appealing to Kerala's tradition of religious tolerance.

Started in the 1960s, the KSSP is the best kind of social movement. It is run entirely by volunteers, receives no foreign funding, is not connected to any political party and will launch campaigns on a broad range of issues. There are KSSP bases in the main towns of Kerala, and members and representatives in almost every village – like this one of Poovachal.

An old Muslim leader is sitting chatting with a old Hindu over a cup of tea inside a tailor's shop as they watch the play. A barechested young man now takes the microphone and makes an impassioned speech to the crowd gathered in the street. He is linking the struggle against imperialism with the current struggle against sectarianism and calling for 'integrity to check the forces of disintegration'.

'Do you think you can combat sectarianism?' I ask the local KSSP rep who is translating for me.

He ponders: 'We have a great advantage in that our people are educated. But we cannot be complacent. We have to act now...'

A major disadvantage is that the current United Democratic Front state government includes a number of sectarian parties – Hindu, Muslim and Christian.

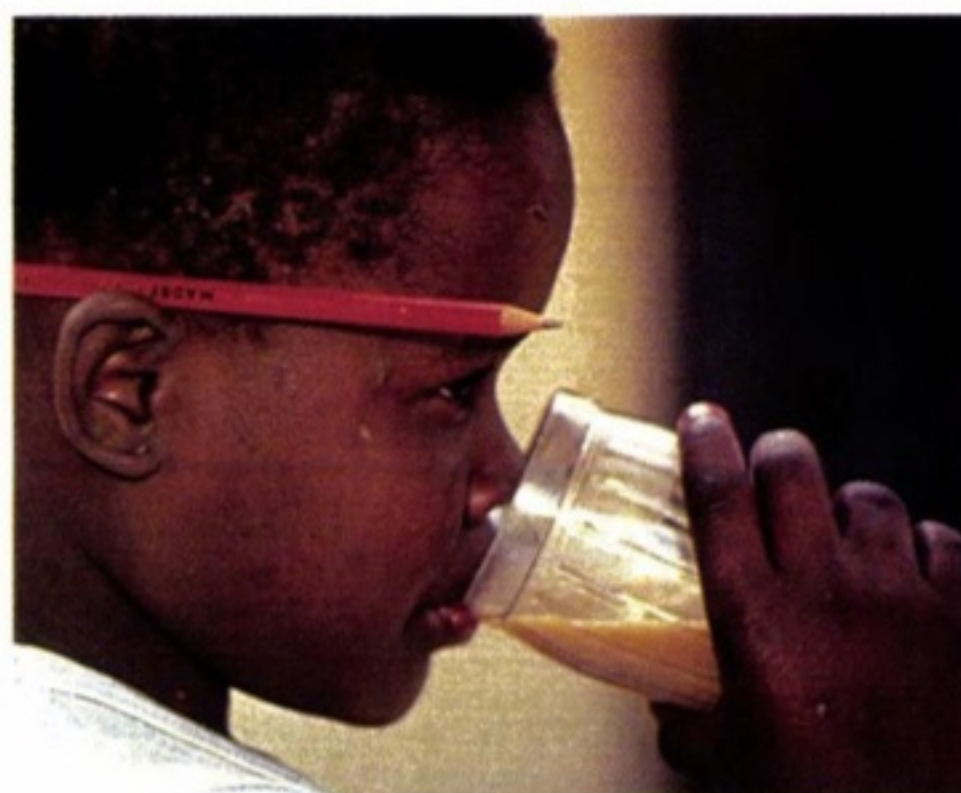
The prospect of Kerala's atmosphere of tolerance breaking down is a sad one. I think of all the occasions that people have chatted warmly and easily to me and invited me into their homes without ever sounding me out on my religion – or my politics for that matter. I recall Mandikini's comment about how her outlawed Naxalite family were always treated with tolerance and respect by their neighbours: 'They were ordered to spy on us but most turned a blind eye'.

'What has the future in store?' I wonder as I climb up the steps of the plane that will take me out of Kerala. Will the dedicated KSSP activists be able to mobilize people against sectarian violence, setting an example for not only the rest of India but the rest of the world?

Will the pundits be proved right and the communist-led Left Democratic Front come back to power in the next elections? Will green politics join with the red? Will feminists like Nata or Ajitha lead feminism into a new, more radical phase? And will a new generation of activists be able to form a radical mass culture that is capable of challenging the ideologically bankrupt New World Order?

Catching the last glimpse of the coconut trees through the plane window I reckon that if the past is anything to go by, Kerala's future is likely to be colourful, radical and unpredictable. ■

STREET PEOPLE



PHOTOS: MARCO SIQUEIRO

Left: underneath the arches in Rio; the *Escrava Anastasia* school
Top right: a colourful result from donated pens.
Bottom right: Marlene takes a break from running the creche.

School for nobodies

Improvised classroom under Rio's Metro

BRAZIL still has the largest foreign debt of any Third World country. 'Structural adjustment' programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are devastating essential public services. The effects are now all too visible on city streets.

The *Escrava Anastasia* school works on one of Rio de Janeiro's busiest avenues under an elevated section of the Metro railway. About 20 children study while the trains rattle over their heads.

The school was set up by Aparecida Davi Dias, an ex-housemaid who lives with many other families under this same roof. Two years ago she tried to enrol her daughter in a state school which refused to take her on. So she got hold of a blackboard and chalk, made desks and benches from pieces of wood collected in the streets and opened her own school. Her husband César – a 23-year-old truck driver who is only just literate himself – was the first teacher. Aparecida became one of the first pupils.

Today the situation in the little school is much improved. 'People stop their cars, ask what we need and then come back with pencils, pens, notepads and books,' says Aparecida. Rare donations of money are used to buy snacks – some children only come to the classes because they get something to eat.

Kátia Estrella, a lawyer, gives up her free afternoons to teach in the school. Always shouting over the noise, always patient with a

class disrupted by pigs, chickens and dogs wandering through the 'classroom', Kátia does what she can. But she has no illusions. 'I am not the Government,' she says, 'nor responsible for the life they have to lead. Unfortunately, I cannot solve their problems.'

The tireless Aparecida has also opened a creche to help the mothers who work outside the area. In a crowded wooden shack about 15 babies spend the day sitting on a piece of carpet playing with broken toys. The creche is run by Marlene, an abandoned child aged 11 whom Aparecida met in the street and is now bringing up.

Aparecida once had her own house but it was destroyed by a flood after a thunderstorm. Without any way to buy or rent another she ended up on the street. 'Since then I have changed a lot,' she says.

What she has gained in strength she has lost in happiness. 'I am always so sad that I don't have any desire to play, to amuse myself... Living under a viaduct is not easy. To society, to the Government, we are nobodies. What happened to my daughter at the school was a lesson to me. Now I never say where I live. If anyone asks my address I lie.'

Even the notorious Rio *favelas* (slums) are now too expensive for many working people who cannot afford to pay rent. Brazil's deepening social crisis reinforces prejudice against fragile communities who have nothing left but their own ingenuity. ■

Márcia Kevorkian

Storming the Somali beach

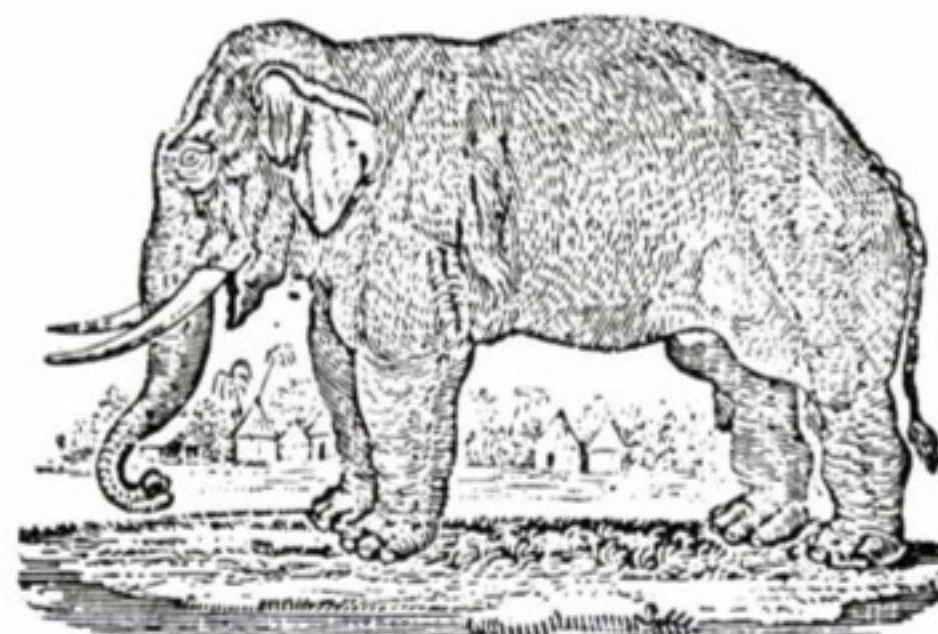
“ The US invasion of Somalia began as a cruel and unnecessary act of charity. Armed to the teeth and posturing for the massed media like the Pirates of Pendleton, the amphibious troops made it clear to the whole world watching that what this intervention communicated was power, not compassion.

Soldiers geared for Anzio or Inchon 'secured' an empty hangar by rousing four unarmed men from sleep, screaming at them to spreadeagle on the ground and binding them with handcuffs when they did not obey English orders. It was a while before the Pakistani commander of the UN forces came and identified the men as his own guards, embraced them and set them free.

When US might is deployed abroad it invariably strikes at targets at home. Reagan's Grenada and Bush's Panama and Kuwait were in part designed to impress Americans still wary of war after Vietnam. Somalia is meant to soften up the country for more interventions under the New World Order.

Somalis are in dire need of aid and America could have provided packages without the terrifying military wrapping. It is offensive and ultimately unwise for the world's super-duper power to blaze into one of the world's poorest places just to make a point. In the same way that the Los Angeles police helped to create the rebellion in South Central over the years by militarizing its presence there, so Washington's global cops are making war when they should be bringing peace. By the way: When do they plan to Restore Hope to South Central? **”**

Editorial from The Nation, Vol 255, No 22.



Ivory trade set to resume

The ivory trade is set to start again, after being banned since 1989. Botswana, Malawi, Namibia and Zimbabwe have agreed on ways to exclude poached ivory from the market. These countries argue that their well-managed herds have become so big that regulated trade is in the best interests of the species and their economies. A recent aerial survey in Zimbabwe showed that there are 45,000 elephants in Hwange National Park alone, three times as many as the vegetation can support. The Southern Africa Centre for Ivory Marketing has agreed a system for marking legally-culled tusks: a self-adhesive strip with a hologram plus a bar code and a number. They hope that illegal traders and poachers will be unable to copy the official hologram on poached ivory.

From New Scientist, No 1851.

MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS

Corporate rap sheet

Ten worst corporations of 1992

A SMALL but feisty US publication, *Multinational Monitor*, has given its awards for the world's ten worst corporations of 1992:

Absolute Vodka (Sweden):

'Absolute Silence': To this vodka giant for spending huge sums of money on promoting vodka despite the devastating effects of alcoholism.

Caterpillar (US):

'Bulldozing the Union': To the manufacturer of bright yellow construction machinery for attempting to intimidate its workforce into accepting unreasonable working conditions.

Chevron (US):

'Where Butterflies Come First': To this integrated petroleum company for an appalling environmental record around the world while running an advertising campaign claiming it has a good record with butterflies, eagles and foxes.

Food Lion (US):

'Clorox the Fish': To the fastest growing food chain stores in the US with a profit margin three times the industry average, for cheating on food regulations, for example by adding Clorox bleach to old fish to remove the smell.

General Electric (US):

'Still Bad After All these Years': To the engineering conglomerate for allegedly continuing to build weapons of mass destruction at the expense of the environment and the health of workers and communities around its facilities.

General Motors (US):

'Exploding Gas Tanks': To this fading motor giant for manufacturing and market-



PHOTO: PAUL FUSCO/MAGNUM

Corporate calamities: multinationals are slow to clean up their act.

ing pickup trucks with allegedly hazardous gas tanks leading to over 300 deaths.

Martin Marietta (US):

'Poisoning Whistleblowers': To this energy systems company for punishing an employee who voiced concern about health-and-safety issues, ordering him to sit in a room filled with toxic and radioactive chemicals.

Mitsubishi (Japan):

'Mauling Malaysia': To this multi-tentacled operation for the role of its trading arm, the Mitsubishi Corporation, in importing large quantities of tropical rainforest timber, particularly from Malaysia.

Stone Container (US):

'Rock Bottom on Labour': To this Chicago-

based producer of paper bags and packages, for contaminating the environment and destroying forests around the world, while recklessly endangering the lives of its workers in the US.

Time Warner / Whittle (US):

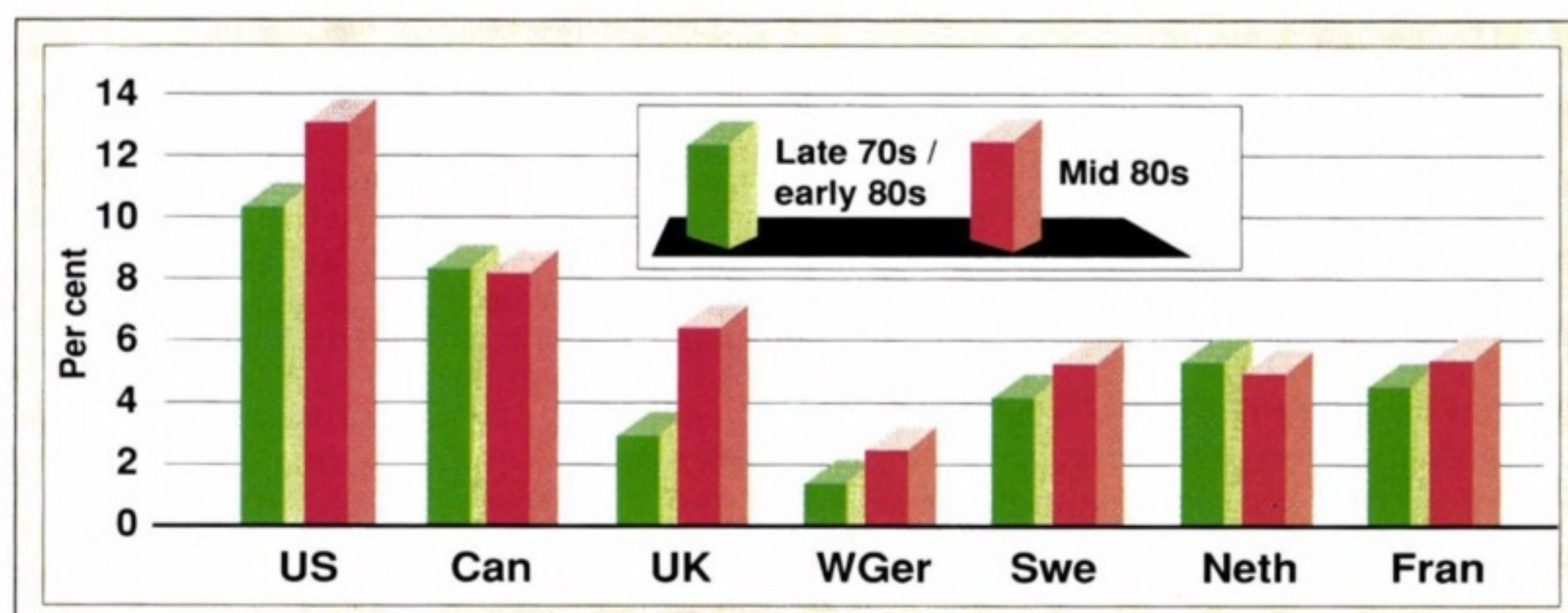
'Selling Kids Short': To this newly merged media giant and majority owner of Whittle Communications whose Channel One TV news service for schools allegedly hawks products like candy and sneakers to children in the classroom.

For more details contact *Multinational Monitor*, PO Box 19405, Washington DC 20036, USA.

One legacy of the 1980s

Increase in severe poverty during the decade for the non-elderly. Incomes below 40 per cent of median household income.

Source: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Washington DC, two-year study of poverty, co-chaired by William Julius Wilson of the University of Chicago and Roger Lawson of the University of Southampton. From *New Statesman and Society*, Vol 5 No 230, 1992.



Ever-expanding ozone hole

The ozone hole over Antarctica expanded by 15 per cent in 1992 and is now nearly the size of the entire North American continent, a US space agency has said. Preliminary results of its ozone-mapping project aboard the Nimbus-7 satellite showed the Antarctic ozone hole measuring 23 million square kilometres on 23 September 1992 - up from 20 million square kilometres in 1991. The surface area of the North American continent is 24 million square kilometres. Ozone makes up a thin protective layer in the Earth's upper atmosphere, absorbing harsh ultraviolet rays from the sun and preventing them from reaching the Earth, where they would cause damage to plants and increase the risk of skin cancer.

From *Consumer Currents*, No 150.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



PHOTO: BRIDGET ANDERSON

Sacred slopes of Mount Apo tapped for boiling water.

Desecration

Philippines power project threatens ancestral lands

MOUNT Apo on the Philippines island of Mindanao is the most sacred site for the indigenous people of the rainforest, the Lumads. More than 100,000 Lumads hunt and farm on its slopes, as they have since records began. It is the burial ground of their ancestors and home to their supreme being, Apo Sandawa.

Their land covers a hugely profitable source of geothermal energy which the government-owned Philippines National Oil Company (PNOC) wishes to tap, and more so since the region is short of energy and suffers prolonged electricity cuts. So PNOC plans to drill into the mountain to tap the boiling water and use it to generate electricity.

The Lumads are resisting this desecration. 'If this project continues,' says Edtami Mansayagan, a Lumad leader, 'it will not just mean our physical death through environmental destruction, but also the death of our history, of our people's dignity, of our

dreams as a people.'

Mount Apo is the source of 28 rivers. Any pollution would be disastrous for the whole island. Roads to the site would give access to illegal loggers eager to exploit one of the Philippines' few remaining rainforests.

Both the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have so far refused to fund the project. But now the Export Import Bank of Japan is backing a bid by a consortium of Japanese companies to build the power plant. The investment and industrial development that the project aims to attract would be predominantly Japanese.

There is now a strong military and paramilitary presence all over Mount Apo. Last year the rebel New People's Army attacked the drill rig. PNOC has set up its own paramilitary force. Opponents of the project allege harassment, arrest and torture. Two Lumads were killed the day before they were due to give an interview to the local radio station protesting against forced resettlement. If the project continues the bloodshed can only get worse.

Bridget Anderson

Super subs to the Gulf

Russia is selling the Soviet Union's family silver - in this case three sophisticated Kilo class submarines to Iran. Western powers are worried that the deal will alter the delicate balance of power in the Middle East. For Iran now has the capability to deploy the

submarines in the narrow Straits of Hormuz through which 20 per cent of the world's oil is shipped. The US has decided to deal with the problem by sending an attack submarine with anti-submarine warfare capability and Tomahawk cruise missiles to patrol the Gulf.

From Campaign Against the Arms Trade Newsletter, No 118.

When the buck stops

Already with unprecedented commitments in Bosnia, Somalia and Cambodia, the United Nations has gone on to authorize the creation of a 7,500-strong peace-keeping force for Mozambique. The operation will bring the number of UN troops deployed around the world to 60,000. The intention in Mozambique is to end 14 years of civil war by disarming the Renamo combatants and organizing an election.

From Time, Vol 140, No 26

END

END
Quote

WAR PRAYER

O Lord our God,
help us to tear their soldiers to bloody
shreds with our shells;
help us to cover their smiling fields
with the pale forms of their patriot
dead;
help us to drown the thunder of the
guns with the shrieks of their wound-
ed, writhing in pain;
help us to lay waste their humble
homes with a hurricane of fire;
help us to wring the hearts of their
unoffending widows with unavailing
grief;
help us to turn them out roofless with
their little children
to wander unfriended the wastes of
their desolate land
in rags and hunger and thirst,
sports of the sun flames of summer
and the icy winds of winter;
broken in spirit,
worn with travail,
imploring Thee for the refuge of the
grave
and denied it.

For our sakes who adore Thee, Lord,
blast their hopes,
blight their lives,
protract their bitter pilgrimage,
make heavy their steps,
water their way with their tears,
stain the white snow with the blood of
their wounded feet.

We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him
Who is the Source of Love,
and Who is the ever-faithful refuge
and friend
of all who are sore beset
and seek his aid with humble and con-
trite hearts.
AMEN

Mark Twain



Black power revived: Denzel Washington takes *Malcolm X* into the heartland of popular culture.



Malcolm X

directed by Spike Lee

It seems fitting, maybe even inevitable. *Malcolm X* and Spike Lee, two of the most uncompromising figures in recent Afro-American history, meet on celluloid to do what they always do best – encourage resistance and inspire debate. *Malcolm X* is over three hours long but don't let that stop you from going to see the film – it combines a spacious epic quality with Lee's ability to tell a gripping story. You won't get bored.

Lee effectively demolishes the myth of Malcolm as a demagogue spreading race hatred, without falling into mindless hero worship of an icon. Denzel Washington's portrayal renders Malcolm very human indeed although he shaves off some rough edges for popular consumption.

Visually stunning images jump off the screen. But somehow the parts don't quite add up to a whole. You lose a sense of Malcolm as a person as the film moves into his Black Muslim days. Too much time gets taken up with speeches and you lose a sense of how and why he is changing.

In a funny way the film is personal when you want political and vice versa. Malcolm's break with the Muslims, for example, is a reaction to personal corruption and jealousy at the top which conveys little of the political disagreements which must have played a big role. Yet when Malcolm undergoes a dramatic change on a pilgrimage to Mecca you only get a sense of the political implications.

Smaller dramatic moments get lost in the immensity of the production and it is fair to say that Lee fails to lead his audience into Malcolm's private life. This diminishes the effect of his assassination at the end of the film.

But perhaps this is asking too much. After all, Malcolm was an essentially public person and is of interest because of this. And it is on this level, with the exception of the silly triumphalist ending, that *Malcolm X* is most successful. The complexity and richness of the man's thinking, his ability and willingness to rethink and strategize and the clarity of his commitment are overpowering.

Lee has done a powerful service in uncovering a part of the history of resistance that the white establishment has been only too keen to see buried. Best of all, the film has provoked a revival of interest in Malcolm X in North America, with displays of his writings adorning the shelves of even commercial booksellers. Don't miss it.

Politics ★★★★★

Entertainment ★★★★★



The Death of Klinghoffer

by John Adams (*Elektra Nonesuch*)

Conflicts of a musical nature aside, opera has not hitherto been known for its combative nature. Indeed, with most operatic composers choosing their characters from a genepool of Figaros and fairy queens and their storylines from legend or folk history, operatic subject-matter has

remained – with a few notable diversions – a hermetic world, far removed from the present day. Such innate conservatism is all the more odd when set against the innovation coming from other areas of music theatre – dance, performance art and the like – but it seems that the composers are catching up: John Adams' *Death of Klinghoffer* is a watershed.

The opera is based on true events. In 1985 Leon Klinghoffer, an elderly American Jew on the



Mediterranean cruise ship *Achille Lauro*, was brutally murdered by Palestinian hijackers. Adams, a US composer who mixes minimalist technique with lush, romantic orchestrations, declared his interest in alternative subject-matter with his first opera *Nixon in China*. But if that work raised audience eyebrows with its subtle irreverence, then *Klinghoffer* – which opens with a chorus of exiled Palestinians – raised the roof.

Of course *Klinghoffer* is not – as some US critics felt – an exercise in pro-Palestinian propaganda. In fact the chorus of exiled Palestinians is followed by one of exiled Jews. Another chorus recalls Hagar, an Old Testament figure whose importance in both Judaic and Islamic tradition is established. Tourist-characters wonder at the ruins of the ancient world but neglect the key issues

of modern times.

The Hagar chorus and Klinghoffer's death song – the *Aria of the Falling Body* – stand amongst his best vocal music. The orchestral music is at once purposeful, reflective, dramatic and witty (with numerous nods towards other composers). At first listening its mood sounds closer to Debussy or Satie than to Adams' minimalist forebears.

Adams offers no solution to the continuing conflict in the Middle East; neither does he take sides. What he does do – and magnificently, movingly so – is to embed the very individual tragedy of Klinghoffer in a history of religious and political conflict. If *Klinghoffer* has one single message, it's that history, even ancient history, has consequences right up to the present moment. And this is a musical wake-up call.

Politics ★★★★★

Entertainment ★★★★★



books

Time of Fear

by Deborah Poole and Gerardo Rénique
(Latin America Bureau)

It is indeed a time of fear for the shanty-town dwellers of Lima and the Indian peasants of the High Andes who together make up the majority of Peru's 22 million people. They are caught in the middle of a vicious war between the Government and the Sendero Luminoso guerillas.

'Shining Path' – what a magic, poetic name for a revolutionary movement! The reality is horribly different. They may call themselves Maoists but not for them is Mao's dictum about winning the hearts and minds of the masses ('the people are the sea; we are the fish'). Their philosophy and methods invite comparison with those of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge.

This book goes some way towards making good our ignorance of the other guerilla movement, Tupac Amaru, which directs its armed activities more selectively and seeks to gain support from a much wider spectrum of the population.

'Every successful revolution is the kicking open of a rotting door,' said the economist JK Galbraith. The state apparatus of Peru is not yet rotten enough to be kicked open, yet its efforts to put an end to Sendero are often ineffective, so the war looks set to continue for years to come.

To make matters even worse for the peasants in the High Andes, economic pressures have forced them to turn their land over

to growing the coca plant. As a result they find themselves ground between two millstones: the government forces, backed by the US Drug Enforcement Agency, who are trying to stop them growing coca, and the *narcos* (gangs in the service of cocaine traffickers) who exploit them mercilessly.

All this within an economy which suffers hyperinflation of an annual several thousand per cent and with a mountain of foreign debt (roughly \$1,000 per person) which there can be no hope of ever repaying. Poor Peru...

The Latin America Bureau have come up with another authoritative country profile. The authors — a US anthropologist and a Peruvian historian — have written a compelling and convincing story, up-to-date enough to record the capture in September last year of Abimael Guzman, leader of Sendero Luminoso. But you should keep a decent atlas to hand, for the seven maps herein are woefully inadequate.

Politics ☆☆☆

Entertainment ☆☆☆

*Should we should we not pray
for them who thunder promises
from prefab podiums
feeding famished ears with
vows
of promise lands*

*Should we should we not pray
for them who banish thought
from action
murder reason, exile hope
hang poets for their dreams
claiming every right to think
without a mind*

*Should we should we not pray
by their bedside
who ravish our future
in castles sentried
by brass buttons and eunuch
cannon*

*Should we should we not pray
for them who scorch our sun
matchet our moon
ordering us to greet
with bugles and drums
the majesty of their power*

? ? ? ?

Promise Land by Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare, from his *Selected Poems* published by Heinemann.

STAR RATING

Excellent ☆☆☆☆
Very good ☆☆☆
Good ☆☆☆
Fair ☆☆
Poor ☆

Reviews editor: Chris Brazier

THE classic

Reds

... being the film that translated communism into Hollywoodese

WHEN *Reds* was released in the early 1980s, it was fashionable in radical circles to deride it. How could it possibly be a good thing? Ageing Casanova Warren Beatty, one of the most privileged people this planet has ever contained, portraying stalwart socialist hero John Reed... A Hollywood epic version of the Russian Revolution, taking up where *Zhivago* left off... Using great political events as mere backdrop for romance between Reed and fellow journalist Louise Bryant...

Horse-shit, as Reed himself might have said. Any mainstream epic which tackles the Left head-on is bound to be suspected. But for me *Reds* was a quite miraculous achievement: a big-budget (huge for its time) Hollywood movie which treated revolutionary socialism sympathetically, which made people all over the world feel the magnitude of the Russian Revolution. You'd have to be quite a cynic, for example, not to be stirred by the extended sequence which sets the taking of the Winter Palace to the emotional strains of the Internationale and brings the first half of the film to a close.

In these post-Soviet times the Russian Revolution seems a more dubious proposition than it did even when this film was made. But it was still one of the key moments in human history, when the new industrial working class threw off the inevitability of its exploitation; it was surely this moment, for example, which made welfare states inevitable throughout the Western world as fireguards against the flames of insurrection. And by following John Reed through the exaltation and idealism of the Revolution to his profound doubts about its direction at the end, we are emerging with quite an accurate thumbnail portrait of its historical significance.

Broadly *Reds* tells the story of Reed, an early luminary in the US communist movement who gave a fine eye-witness account of the Russian Revolution in his book *Ten Days That Shook The World*. On his return to communist activism in the US he was involved in some typical Left schisms. We witness these in the film — and far more extraordinary to find in a Hollywood film than the Revolution itself is the sight of nitpicking debates in smoke-filled rooms between warring American communist factions. Reed travelled back to Moscow to seek Comintern ratification for his faction and ended up spending the rest of his short life there — he died in 1920 at the age of 33, and remains the only American

to be buried with honour in Red Square.

The Revolution apart, you might think this is not very promising material for an epic movie, and you'd be right. Frankly Beatty (who produced and directed as well as starred) and British dramatist Trevor Griffiths (who scripted) could not have sustained the interest of a mass audience in the political material without moving the relationship between Reed and Bryant to the emotional centre of the film.

Besides, the portrait of the relationship has great merit in itself. Louise Bryant (as played by Diane Keaton) is no empty-headed sex-focus:

she is a feistily intelligent, fiercely independent woman, with a strong record as a journalist and activist in her own right. The scene where Reed proposes that she accompanies him to New York and she responds 'What as?... your girlfriend? your mistress? your paramour? your concubine?' makes a memorable feminist point which carries through into the drama of their relationship throughout. The film is modern enough to insist on Bryant's equality as much as she herself does, and her

courageous solo journey through snowbound civil-warring territory to reach blockaded Russia is given as much impact as any of Reed's own exploits. And I have to say that the scene where the couple are reunited at the death on a railway platform never fails to register with me as one of the great romantic moments in cinema history: when I first saw this it reduced me more completely to tears than any film has before or since.

Reed and Bryant moved in fascinating circles: we meet the celebrated anarchist Emma Goldman, for instance, while Jack Nicholson turns in one of his finest and — in a career built on overplaying — most understated performances as the great playwright Eugene O'Neill. And the movie is given an extra quasi-documentary dimension by its interspersing of wry reminiscences of Reed and Bryant by people like Dora Russell, Rebecca West and Henry Miller: here, more than anywhere, you get the sense that this was a real labour of love for Beatty.

This film could never have persuaded the purists. But there's always a case for taking on the big political issues with the broadest brushstrokes so as to engage with people who will never touch *Ten Days That Shook The World*, let alone socialist theory. There's no broader brushstroke than epic cinema and I'm defiant in my belief that there are few better examples of that genre than *Reds*.

Chris Brazier

Reds directed by Warren Beatty.





QUESTIONS

...that have always intrigued you about the world will appear in this, your section, and be answered by other readers. Please address your answers and questions to 'Curiosities'.

Is it true that the menstrual cycles of women living together in women-only communities (convents, for example) synchronize? And if so, why?

● Yes, it is true – and a houseful of simultaneously pre-menstrual women is no joke! Blame the doorknobs, according to the explanation I have been given. A menstruating woman secretes certain chemicals in her sweat which can set off the cycle in other women who live in close proximity – for example, when they touch the same doorknobs.

Linnea Renton
Sandbach, UK

● Women-only communities do display synchronism of menstrual cycles – but this is not dependent on there being no men present. The key factor is the amount of time that women spend in close contact – close enough for the pheromones responsible for the effect to waft from person to person. More than about eight to ten hours a day is usually sufficient.

The degree of synchronism obtained can be very striking. Women whose usual cycle is one of 24 days lengthen their cycle to 28. Those whose usual cycle is 32 shorten it to 28. Women with very long cycles of over 35 days usually lengthen their cycles further to twice 28 days (56 days) and menstruate with half the frequency of the rest.

The usefulness of the phenomenon is another question. It is common among animals who come into season only once a year, like sheep. And it serves sheep very well. They all have lambs in the spring when the grass is plentiful and all their lambs are exactly the same age so that if they have to run as a flock from predators no lamb is younger and gets left behind.

It does not, however, seem to serve humans at all because women come into season at the ridiculously frequent rate of once every month and their very long pregnancies make synchronism of conception irrelevant. But because it does no great harm it has not been weeded out by evolution. The main problem synchronism causes is to plumbing in places like convents or nurses' homes which have to deal with a hell of a lot of sanitary towels and tampons all at once.

Dr JS Barrett
London, UK

Who first used the expression 'charity begins at home', to whom and why?

● This may have spilled over from Paul's advice to widows with children in *Timothy 1 5.4*: 'Let them learn first to show piety at home'.

By 1670, when Sir Thomas Browne wrote in *Religio Medici*: "'Charity begins at home' is the voice of the world", it was being used as an excuse. A century later the saying was being used to satirical effect in Sheridan's *School for Scandal*:

Rowley: I believe there is no sentiment he has such faith in as that 'charity begins at home'.

Sir Oliver Surface: And his, I presume, is of the domestic sort which never stirs abroad at all.

Bishop Donald Arden
Pinner, UK

● The expression first appears in modern English in Francis Beaumont's *Wit Without Money* (1614): 'Charity and beating begin at home'.

However, it probably originates with the English religious reformer John Wycliffe who wrote (c. 1380): 'Charite schuld bigyne at hem-self'. Wycliffe believed that the church would be better off without priests, prelates and monks and that everyone had the right to read the Bible for themselves. He attempted to produce the first complete English translation of the Bible and envisaged an order of Poor Preachers who would take the teaching to the people. This may give an indication of how he intended the expression to be understood.

Curran A de Bruler
St Austell, UK

AWAITING YOUR ANSWERS

Mosquitoes and other insects insert the equivalent of a micro needle into many human bloodstreams. So why are they not in the list of transmitters of HIV?

RG Sargent
Looe, UK

Why is the depletion of the ozone layer greatest in the southern hemisphere when the use of ozone-destroying chemicals is greatest in the northern hemisphere?

G Roberts
Llandona, Cymru, UK

I've heard that part of the ceremony of Pope-making involves touching of the testicles. If this is true, how and why did this curious custom come about?

Guy Lambert
Oxford, UK

If you have any questions or answers please send them to *Curiosities*, *New Internationalist*, 55 Rectory Road, Oxford OX4 1BW, UK, or to your local NI office (see inside front cover).



TOKEN WOMEN'S ISSUE



Who's hiding?

The best excuse for doing nothing about homelessness or racism is that you didn't know it was happening – or that it was 'hidden'. Just before her untimely death homelessness worker Carolyn Ye Myint produced a report that left no more room for excuses. David Ransom reports.

WE used to believe – or was it just hope? – that uncovering evidence of injustice was the first essential step towards getting it put right. When I worked at No Fixed Abode with the disregarded homeless single people of the East End of London we told ourselves that if we made a case and turned up statistically armed to meetings with movers and shakers, then something useful would happen.

So we often employed the notion of 'hidden' homelessness – of homeless people who had somehow been 'overlooked' by officialdom. The implication was, I suppose, that there had been some kind of careless oversight which would be promptly corrected. At least with our evidence we could pre-empt any cynical appeal for 'more research' – the penultimate recourse of the rogue in search of a convenient excuse to do nothing.

When Carolyn Ye Myint arrived in our office in 1989 the banal fantasies of Thatcher's 'property-owning democracy' were still bleaching the political agenda in Britain. Carolyn began work with the huge ethnic communities of the East End of London – dominated by some 35,000 Bangladeshis, but including 8,000 Chinese or Vietnamese. There was also a small but extraordinarily vibrant community of Somalis, some of whose ancestors had arrived as seafarers generations earlier and who were now joined by people fleeing more recent catastrophes in Somalia.

In Britain 'single homeless' is a euphemism for the 'undeserving poor'. In other words the migrant workers and unconsidered casualties of society whom the welfare state never had the courage to protect. Stereotyped as alcoholic or crazy Celts all too visible on inner-city streets, homeless people without children more often convened in the dingy waiting rooms of indifferent housing authorities who didn't even bother to record their presence.

Such people were (and still are) local kids, people without work or viable families, sleeping on the floors of friends or relatives, excluded by the benefits system, dispensable casualties of economic recession, vulnerable and angry, often plagued by an overwhelming coincidence of catastrophes: a whole new generation of domestic refugees. A quite disproportionately large number of them came from ethnic communities. Their destitution was, in the absence of any case to the contrary, *prima facie* evidence of discrimination.

But add the label 'undeserving poor' to the victims of racism and, unless you are very careful, you promote the notion of an 'underclass'. By definition such a class is powerless, even in its own mind: a suitable case for charity, condescension, contempt. A late twentieth-century reincarnation of Thatcher's eternal nineteenth-century values.

Turning this situation around looked to me at the time like the nearest thing one could devise to an impossible task. But Carolyn set to work undaunted. Bright, sharp and determined, her gentle manner only rarely betrayed the strength of her convictions, formed in part no doubt by the experience of her family, some of

whom remain caught in the waking nightmare of Burma's current dictatorship.

Within a few months I had left to begin work with the NI. From time to time I wondered how she was getting on. But the alarming truth is that years of work with homeless people in the East End of London slipped slowly behind me and beyond my immediate horizons. Then I was given a draft copy of her final report and it all came back into view again, sharper and clearer than I had seen it before.

'If their friends come to visit I have to sit in the kitchen until they have gone,' one homeless youngster staying with friends tells Carolyn. 'I am a nuisance to them and do not know when they will ask me to leave. I try to stay out until as late as possible, and as often as possible, to keep out of their way. I cannot read because I do not want to burn their light at night. Plus their baby is always crying. During the winter the sitting room was cold and I had to sleep with my jumpers on. I am not blaming them. I am really very grateful to them... But I cannot see help coming from anywhere... The days ahead are bleak... I dread the future.'

Young people who dread the future are, it seems to me, the worst possible indictment of a society that has taken their hopes from them almost before they have formed. Their world is not full of extravagant racist gestures, abuse and violence – though there is no lack of that, either. It is quiet, relentless and shocking: a world where dedicated, non-racist people working for non-governmental projects nonetheless find themselves presiding over a racist system of discrimination.

All this after a generation of 'equal opportunity' in Britain.

'When I began this research,' Carolyn writes, 'I would often tell people it was a project about "hidden homelessness" in [the East London borough of] Tower Hamlets. No-one was hiding: they were making as loud a racket as they knew how. But those who are in positions of power in our society are refusing to listen, refusing to see.'

No-one can now say that they did not know. No one who has read this report can talk about 'hidden homelessness' or even 'hidden racism' again. Anyone who has not read it and is in a position of power over the lives of the people it describes is guilty of neglect.

The strange and terrible fact about Carolyn's work is that at the precise moment when she completed it she died. Her death was sudden and totally unexpected. She was still only in her twenties. One might react to this, I suppose, by reflecting on the tragedy and the pointlessness of her death. Or one might reflect on what she might have done had she stayed alive. This is not 'hidden' – she made it perfectly clear. The point is to change things.



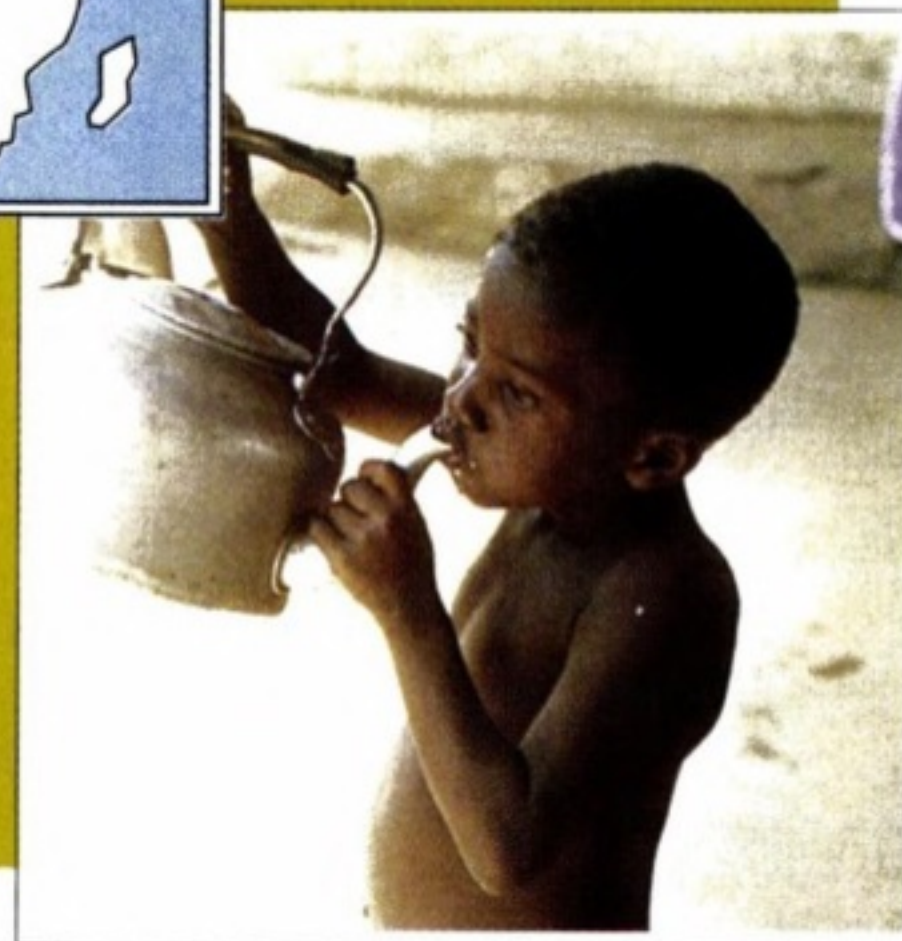
WILLIAM RYAN / CAMERA PRESS

Who's hiding? A report into 'non-priority homelessness' amongst people from black and ethnic communities in Tower Hamlets by **Carolyn Ye Myint** is published by No Fixed Abode, The Brady Centre, 192-196 Hanbury Street, London E1 5HU.

The Gambia

Amid the storms and turmoil of modern Africa, the mini-state of The Gambia provides an interesting tale of survival. Its origin was an accident of history. As a British colony it grew along the two banks of the River Gambia, up from the old port of Bathurst (now the capital Banjul), making it a long thin enclave in Senegalese territory. In the 1870s the French, who ruled Senegal, tried to exchange 'their' Gabon for The Gambia. Under pressure from the Liverpool trading lobby – hoping for riches – the British refused.

Looking back, Gabon might have been a better deal for the British since The Gambia has few natural assets. As a colony, with its peanut/groundnut monoculture, it was the poorest in West Africa. The British believed it would not be viable as an independent state and in the early 1960s encouraged a merger with Senegal. But this idea met resistance from the new Gambian political class and so the country became independent in February 1965. Since then it has sought to diversify economic activity with tourism, a little market gardening and fishing. Peanut and fish processing, brewing, shoes, perfume



and brick production are some of the developing industries.

The Gambia's pleasant beaches and its fame as the birthplace of Kunta Kinte in Alex Haley's book *Roots* have helped place it firmly on the tourist map.

But package tourism from Europe does not benefit

Gambians who live in great poverty away from the tourist centres. The country's economy remains extremely fragile and many people rely on cross-border smuggling with Senegal to supplement their meagre incomes.

Relations with the 'big brother' (Senegal) have proba-

bly been The Gambia's main political headache in its 28 years of independence. Most of that period has seen political peace, even if multi-party democracy has in practice meant permanent rule by the party of the President, Sir Dawda Jawara.

This state of affairs was disrupted by the attempted coup of July 1981, which was only put down with the intervention of Senegalese troops under a mutual defence treaty.

The resultant Senegambian Confederation lasted for just eight years, foundering in 1989 on Gambian fears of being swallowed up.

Since then it has been impossible to establish an economic union between the two countries. Political separateness continues though troubles in the Senegalese province of Casamance led recently to a flood of refugees, making Gambians aware of the impossibility of existing in isolation. In spite of the contrasting French and British cultures imposed by colonialism, the people of Senegambia are one group, seemingly bound to live together.

Kaye Whiteman

AT A glance

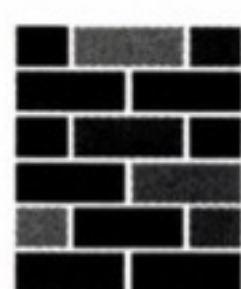
Excellent ★★★★★
Good ★★★★
Fair ★★★
Poor ★★
Appalling ★



INCOME DISTRIBUTION ★★

Not much disparity; small urban population.

1984: ★★



SELF-RELIANCE ★

Dependent on aid for some food and all petroleum.

1984: ★



POSITION OF WOMEN ★★

Islam strong, but women can own land and are the main food growers.

1984: ★★

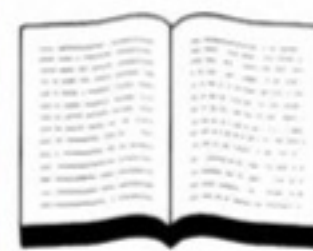


POLITICS

Centre right; President has executive power.



1984



LITERACY ★

Very low at 27%, but local languages were not written until recently.

1984: ★



FREEDOM ★★

Reputation for civil liberties but one party remains in power.

1984: ★★



LIFE EXPECTANCY ★

44 years (US 76 years). One of the lowest in the world. Malaria is endemic.

1984: ★

Leader President Alhaji Sir Dawda Jawara
Economy GNP per capita US \$260 (US \$21,790)
Main exports: Peanuts. Tourism is the second biggest foreign-currency earner. Agriculture employs about 80 per cent of the workforce both on peanut production and food crops such as rice, maize, millet, sorghum and cassava. Some fruit and cotton farming also.

Main imports: Food, live animals, basic manufactures.

People 875,000

Health Infant mortality 138 per 1,000 live births (US 9 per 1,000).

Culture Mandinka people are about 42 per cent of the population; also Fulla, Wolof and other groups.

Religion: Islam, traditional religions and some Christianity.

Languages: English is the official language; others used are Mandinka, Wolof, Fulla, Jola and French.

Sources: The State of the World's Children 1992; The State of the World's Population 1992; World Bank Report 1992; The Africa Review 1991/2.

Last profiled in May 1984

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PHOTOGRAPH: NIC DUNLOP

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